Self-criticism, dependency, and adolescents' externalising and internalising problems

Rui C. CAMPOS,1 Avi BESSER,2 Cristina MORGADO3 and Sidney J. BLATT4

1Department of Psychology and Center for Research on Education and Psychology, University of Évora, Évora, Portugal, 2Department of Behavioral Sciences and Center for Research in Personality, Life Transitions, and Stressful Life Events, Sapir Academic College, Hof Ashkelon, Israel, 3Private Clinical Psychologist, and 4Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, USA

Key words
dependency, Depressive Experiences Questionnaire for adolescents, externalising problems, internalising problems, self-criticism.

Abstract
Objectives: The present study examines the role of dependency (interpersonal relatedness) and self-criticism (self-definition) in internalising and externalising problems.

Methods: Three hundred forty-six suburban Portuguese high-school students age 14–18 (mean = 16.14, standard deviation = 1.19) responded to the Depressive Experiences Questionnaire and the Youth Self-Report. The impact of depression, measured by the Children’s Depression Inventory, on the relationship of dependency and self-criticism on internalising and externalising problem behaviours was examined.

Results: Both self-criticism and dependency, controlled for level of depression, were associated with internalising behaviour problems in both girls and boys. Gender differences, however, were observed in externalising problems. Externalising problems in boys were also associated with self-criticism. But externalising problems in girls were not associated with psychological variables and thus may be more a function of environmental rather than psychological factors.

Conclusions: Implications of these findings for intervention are discussed.

Key Points

1 Clinical interventions with adolescents should focus on the personality qualities of dependency and self-criticism as the motivational force behind the disturbed internalising and externalising behaviour. Internal representations of worthlessness or inferiority that are part of self-criticism could be amenable to change in psychotherapy. Psychotherapy can also be helpful in addressing issues of loneliness, and feelings and fears of abandonment typical of the anaclitic personality configuration.

2 Observed differences between girls and boys have important therapeutic implications and suggest that externalising symptoms in girls may be the consequence of factors other than personality dimensions, possibly socio-economic factors and peer relationships.

3 The Depressive Experiences Questionnaire for adolescents appears to make important contributions to the assessment of these personality dimensions.