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Substance dependence: a search for security?

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SUBSTANCE DEPENDENCE: a search for security?

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY)

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by


DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

1998
I certify that the thesis, *Substance dependence: a search for security*, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Clinical Psychology) in September, 1998, is the result of my own research unless otherwise acknowledged and has not been submitted to any other university or institution for a degree.

Mary Carmel Carse
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ABSTRACT

The social learning and psychodynamic perspectives on substance dependence have argued that intrapsychic variables are crucial in its development. They have also found that substance-dependent people have considerable difficulties in interpersonal relationships, particularly partner relationships. One account of the connection between a person's internal reality and behaviour in interpersonal relationships is provided by attachment theory. Experiences with primary caregivers in childhood are argued to form the basis of a person's security in the sense of self and in relation to others. Damaging experiences with such attachment figures can result in insecure attachment which may place the person at risk of developing psychopathology in adult life. A model of substance dependence is proposed which views substance-dependent people as having severe disturbance of attachment organisation, and, secondary to this, impairment of mood and of functioning in close interpersonal relationships. It is proposed that the substance provides attachment-related security and comfort for such people.

Sixty substance-dependent people in six residential rehabilitation centres in Australia were interviewed about their experience of substance use and compared with 32 non-substance-dependent participants on substance use, attachment, mood and the experience of close relationship. Approximately half the substance-dependent group was judged to have experienced an attachment relationship with the substance. On two measures of attachment, the Attachment Style Questionnaire (Feeney, Noller & Hanrahan, 1994) and the Reciprocal Attachment Questionnaire (West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994), substance-dependent people reported greater attachment insecurity than the control group. They also reported greater problems with intimacy and more loneliness in close interpersonal relationships when measured using the Miller Social Intimacy Scale (Miller & Lefcourt, 1986) and the Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults (DiTommaso & Spinner, 1993). Mood consistent with the loss of an
attachment relationship with the substance and underlying attachment insecurity was found to a greater extent in the substance-dependent group, that is, greater depression and anxiety respectively, indicated on the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck, 1978) and the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) (Beck, 1987).

All components of the proposed model of substance dependence were supported, the attachment relationship with the substance by about half of the substance-dependent group. The model, therefore, is argued to have considerable clinical utility. It should assist the comprehension of substance-dependent people and the difficulties many of them experience in attempting to recover from their dependence. Where an attachment relationship with the substance is thought to be involved in the dependence, it indicates the appropriate method of treatment.