

CHAPITRE II

QUÊTE EXISTENTIELLE ET AMOUR

Le chapitre précédent a été consacré à la définition de l'ouverture d'esprit dans le domaine existentiel. Nous l'avons définie comme une quête existentielle, c'est-à-dire une disposition à remettre en question, voire à changer ses croyances existentielles et sa vision du monde. Ce deuxième chapitre aborde les corrélats émotionnels et relationnels de l'ouverture d'esprit existentielle². Nous avons vu dans le chapitre précédent que la quête existentielle n'est pas forcément entreprise pour le plaisir de la réflexion, mais est-elle pour autant accompagnée d'affects négatifs ? Le second point abordé est la dimension affective de l'ouverture d'esprit existentielle. Elle sera étudiée à travers le lien entre la quête existentielle et une relation clé dans la définition du sens de la vie, la relation amoureuse.

² Les questionnaires utilisés dans cette série d'études sont présentés dans les annexes 1, 7, 8 et 9.

**UNCERTAINTY AS MOST FAITHFUL SWEETHEART: EXISTENTIAL
QUESTIONING AND TROUBLES IN ROMANTIC RELATIONS**

Van Pachterbeke, M., Lelakis, A., Saroglou, V. *Uncertainty as most faithful sweetheart: Existential questioning and troubles in romantic relations*. Manuscript in preparation.

Abstract

Can human need for meaning and need for social relationships form a harmonious pair? This paper investigates the link between existential questioning and a primary kind of relationships, love ones. Specifically, the links between existential quest and Sternberg's three components of love, intimacy, passion, and commitment, were investigated. We furthermore hypothesized that attachment insecurity and neuroticism mediate these links. An online survey permitted to show that existential quest is negatively related to love intimacy and commitment. Attachment insecurity mediates both links whereas neuroticism mediates the relation between existential quest and love intimacy only. On the whole results show that a questioning attitude towards meaning can be deleterious for intimate social relationships.

Introduction

Humans are self-conscious entities that strive to build meaning and reflect on these productions and their inconsistencies (Heine, Proulx and Vohs, 2006). At the same time, humans are moved by affiliation needs (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), and more specifically, the need to engage in romantic relations. Can these two fundamental human needs form a harmonious duo? Previous evidence leads to think this is not the case. Attitude towards meaning can be deleterious for social relationships. Religious questioning, for example, brings social criticism (Burris, Jackson, Tarpley, and Smith, 1996) and feelings of not being understood (Graham, McDonald, & Klaassen, 2008). A way to flee existential uncertainty and the anxiety it causes is to invest in a romantic relation (Mikulincer, Florian, and Hirschberger, 2004). This paper investigates the relation between existential questioning and romantic investment. It thus addresses an important paradox of nowadays : people are encouraged to be open-minded, notably about existential questions, but openness can have negative consequences at the social level, notably in love relationships.

Existential quest and love

The tendency to engage in the process of questioning one's opinion regarding existential issues, called existential quest, is a mix of uncertainty regarding fundamental issues with doubt, questioning, and openness to change (Van Pachterbeke, Keller, and Saroglou, in press). Existential questers have several qualities that could make them a-priori attractive romantic partners. They can relativize their ideas and take the perspective of other people. Furthermore, they are empathic, prosocial, and altruistic (Van Pachterbeke et al., in press). But on the other hand, their existential questioning makes them uncertain, and this uncertainty can potentially trouble love relationships. Love has been described as a mix of three components (Sternberg, 1986). The first, intimacy, refers to feelings of closeness and connectedness towards the

partner; the second, passion, concerns romantic drive as well as physical and sexual attraction. Decision/commitment is the third component. It refers to the conscious and cognitive decision that one loves another person and to the commitment to maintain the love relationship.

Existential quest, love, and attachment

Existential questers are uncertain and uncertainty could disturb intimate relationships. Indeed self-doubt (low self-esteem and low trust in one's interpersonal qualities) causes doubt in the partner's love (Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, and Rose, 2001). The uncertainty of existential questioning could thus make attachment insecure and, by this way, trouble romantic relationships.

Humans are meaning makers that try to build representations of the relations between the self and the external world, comprising other people (Heine, Proulx and Vohs, 2006).

Representations about the relationship between the self and the love partner are stored in internal working models. These models define the attachment style and have a direct impact on romantic attitudes (Feeney and Noller, 1990). Internal working models were initially considered as rather stable but several researches have shown that they may change. They vary over time (Davila, Burge, and Hammen, 1997; Davila and Sargent, 2003; Pietromonaco and Barrett, 2000) and they are influenced by the degree to which relationship partners satisfy fundamental psychological needs (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, and Decy, 2000), but also by major life transitions (Davila et al., 1997) and by the meaning attributed to events (Davila and Sargent, 2003). Existential quest is defined by the openness to change one's worldview and the meaning attributed to life (Van Pachterbeke, Keller, & Saroglou, in press). These changes are most probably accompanied by changes in internal working models. As a consequence, existential questers should be unsure of their feelings and uncertain about their willingness to commit. This ambivalence is a feature of insecure attachment (Brennan and

Shaver, 1995). Internal working models also vary across relationships (La Guardia et al., 2000; Pietromonaco et al., 2000). Adult romantic relationships are very specific given that they are built on the basis of projections in the future. But existential questers are open to change and as a consequence should be quite uncertain about their future, which again could foster ambivalence and avoidant attachment.

Finally, questers should value autonomy and should be reactively unwilling to rely on others, which are two features of the avoidant attachment style (Pietromonaco et al., 2000; Sibley and Overall, 2009).

In sum, we hypothesize that existential quest will have an impact on internal working models of attachment figures and that this will be accompanied by troubled romantic relationships. In other words, the links between existential quest and romantic attitudes should be mediated by attachment (in)security.

Existential quest and neuroticism

Research on the questioning attitude about religious or existential beliefs suggests a positive relation between the quest attitude and neuroticism (Hill, Francis, Argyle, and Jackson, 2004; Lavri & Flere, 2010; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, and Lorentz, 2008; Van Pachterbeke et al., in press) whereas conservatism, at least the political one, is associated with well-being (Napier and Jost, 2008). Neuroticism is detrimental for intimate relationships (Ozer and Benet-Martinez, 2006). Indeed, this tendency to experience negative emotions is associated with poor relationship quality and negative relationship outcomes. More precisely, neuroticism and intimacy in relationship are negatively correlated (White, Hendrick, and Hendrick, 2004). We thus hypothesize that, similarly to insecure attachment, neuroticism is a mediator of the negative link between existential quest and romantic attitudes.

Method

Participants

Participants were contacted by means of the social network Facebook. An invitation to fill our questionnaire containing a website link and an encouragement to forward the message was sent to a psychology student's Facebook contacts. We thus used a snowball sampling method. The questionnaire was written in French. Participants were mainly from Belgium and France. Data were collected from 456 participants who filled in the study online without receiving any compensation. For coherence concern, sample was truncated at percentiles 2.5 and 97.5 on the base of age (age truncated, mean age of 23.53, $SD = 3.41$, range = 18-35; 73 percent females).

We tested the hypotheses concerning the links between existential quest and romantic investment, as well as those concerning the potential mediators of this link on the 293 participants who declared to have a romantic partner. This sub-sample was composed of 223 (76 percent) females, and had a mean age of 23.72 ($SD = 3.45$, range = 18-35). We tested the hypothesis concerning the link between existential questioning and the status of being engaged in a romantic relationship on the whole sample.

Measures

Existential quest. The 9 items included in the scale (Van Pachterbeke et al., in press) referred to valuing doubt on existential questioning, being open to change existential beliefs and worldviews, and being uncertain about life's goal. A sample item reads "Today, I still wonder about the meaning and goal of my life". Participants responded to each item on a 7-point response scale with endpoints labeled (1) not at all true and (7) completely true. A mean global quest score was computed ($\alpha = .74$).

Adult attachment. Styles of attachment were measured by an adaptation (Saroglou, Kimpeneers, and Seynhaeve, 2003) of the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (Brennan, Clark, and Shaver, 1998). The original 36-item scale was reduced to 18 items by Saroglou et al. (2003) but the two factors structure was preserved. The scale contains 9 items tapping attachment anxiety (e.g., “I worry a lot about my relationships”) and 9 tapping avoidance (e.g., “I find it relatively easy to get close to my partner” [reverse scored]). The two factor structure was replicated in our sample with a principal component analysis with varimax rotation. Mean avoidance ($\alpha = .87$) and anxiety ($\alpha = .83$) scores were computed. Data on attachment avoidance scale had a positive asymmetric distribution (skewness index of .82) and were log-transformed (skewness index of .06 after transformation).

Neuroticism. This dimension of the Big Five personality model was measured using the 8 Neuroticism items from the Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999). An example of items reads “I often feel depressed, blue”. Participants had to indicate their agreement with items on a 7-point likert scale. A global mean score was computed ($\alpha = .86$).

Romantic attitudes. Romance components were investigated with the triangular love scale (Sternberg, 1997). Each of the three components of love, as defined in Sternberg’s theory, was investigated with 12 items : intimacy (e.g., “I have a comfortable relationship with my partner”), passion (e.g., “I find myself thinking about my partner frequently during the day”), and commitment (e.g., “I plan to continue in my relationship with my partner”). A mean score was computed for each of the three dimensions (intimacy: $\alpha = .92$; passion: $\alpha = .90$; commitment: $\alpha = .90$). Because of a large negative asymmetric distribution (respective skewness indices of -1.40, -.86, and -.57), the three variables were box-cox transformed to correct distributions (after transformations, the three skewness indices were respectively -.61, -.37, -.31).

Demographic data. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were invited to indicate their age, gender and whether they were engaged in a romantic relationship.

Results

Existential quest was negatively correlated with age. No other variable was linked to age. Neuroticism and anxious attachment were more important among females; no other variable was significantly correlated with gender.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and partial correlations controlling for age and gender.

Variable	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Quest	4.73 (0.91)	-					
2. Intimacy	6.07 (0.87)	-.10*	-				
3. Passion	5.50 (1.04)	-.05	.78**	-			
4. Engagement	4.97 (1.23)	-.10*	.70**	.80**	-		
5. Attachment anxiety	4.51 (1.18)	.20**	-.13*	.05	.04	-	
6. Attachment avoidance	2.44 (1.08)	.21**	-.55**	-.53**	-.47**	.13*	-
7. Neuroticism	4.15 (1.16)	.25**	-.15**	-.05	-.01	.38**	.12*

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ (one-tailed).

Means, standard deviations, and correlations between measures are presented in Table 1. Existential quest was negatively related to two romantic components: intimacy and commitment but was unrelated to passion. Besides, the more people had an existential

questionnnng, the more they had an insecure attachment style, in both anxiety and avoidance dimensions. Finally, existential quest was positively linked to the tendency to experience negative emotions. All three romantic components were negatively related to attachment avoidance, but only intimacy was (negatively) related to attachment anxiety. Neuroticism was also a negative correlate of intimacy but was unrelated to the other love elements.

Based on the correlations matrix, anxious and avoidant attachment, as well as neuroticism, satisfied the conditions to be tested as potential mediators of the relation between existential quest and love intimacy, but attachment avoidance was the only potential mediator of the link between quest and love engagement. The predicted mediators of the relation between existential quest and love intimacy were tested separately by bootstrapping analyses using the method described by Preacher and Hayes (2008) for estimating direct and indirect effects. Age and gender were entered as covariates. The total effect of existential quest on love intimacy was significant (total effect coefficient = -2.65, $p = .04^1$). Bootstrap results indicated that the effect became non-significant when attachment anxiety was entered in the model (direct effect coefficient = -2.05, $p = .09$). The point estimate of the indirect effect was -.58 with a 95% bias-corrected and accelerated confidence interval (BCa IC) of -1.44 to -.07. When attachment avoidance was entered, the effect also became non-significant (direct effect coefficient = .29, $p = .41$; point estimate of indirect effect = -2.94; BCa IC of -4.90 to -1.31). Finally, analyses revealed that neuroticism is also a mediator of the relation between existential quest and love intimacy (direct effect coefficient = -1.75, $p = .12$; point estimate of indirect effect = -.87; BCa IC of -1.97 to -.19).

The three significant mediators of the relation between existential quest and love intimacy, i.e. attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and neuroticism, correlated together.

1. All p-values reported are one-tailed.

As a consequence, they could bring redundant information. Therefore, the mediators were tested together by bootstrapping analyses using methods described by Preacher and Hayes (2008) for estimating direct and indirect effects. Age and gender were entered as covariates. As shown in Figure 1, in this model, attachment avoidance (point estimate of indirect effect = -2.87; BCa IC of -4.90 to -1.29) and neuroticism (point estimate of indirect effect = -.56; BCa IC of -1.54 to -.01) were significant mediators, whereas attachment anxiety had no longer significant mediation role (point estimate of indirect effect = -.18; BCa IC of -.87 to .35).

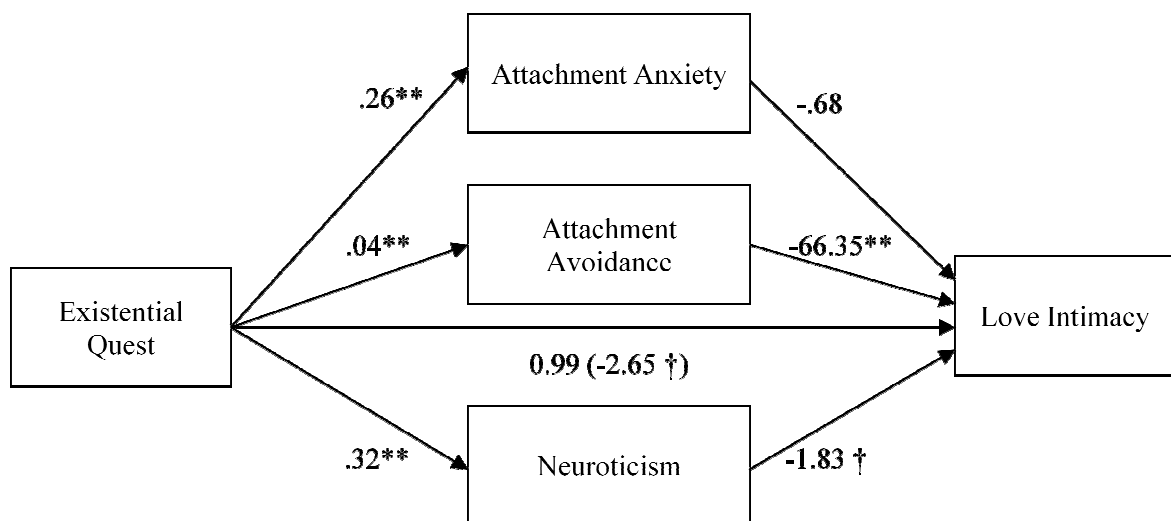


Figure 1. Multiple mediations of the Existential Quest – Love Intimacy link. † $p < .1$, ** $p < .01$. (one-tailed).

The only potential mediator of the relation between existential quest and love engagement, i.e. attachment avoidance, was tested through the same bootstrap analyses with age and gender as covariates (cf. Figure 2). The total effect of existential quest on love engagement was significant (total effect coefficient = -.26, $p = .04$) but totally disappeared when attachment avoidance was entered in the model (direct effect coefficient = -.02, $p = .45$; point estimate of indirect effect = -.24; BCa IC of -.41 to -.10).

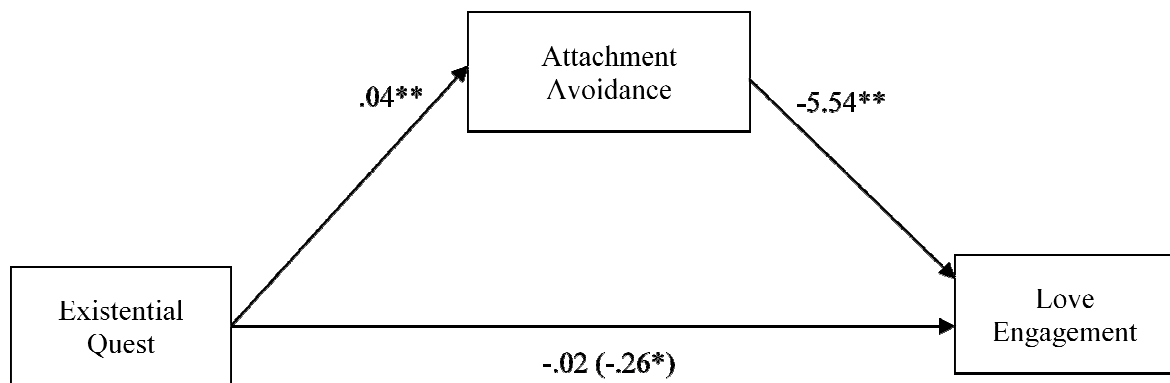


Figure 2. Mediations of the Existential Quest – Love Engagement link. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. (one-tailed).

Last but not least, a logistic regression on the whole sample, i.e. single and engaged people (sample still truncated on age), showed that existential quest accurately predicted the marital status (single or engaged; Hosmer and Lemeshow $\chi^2(8) = 2.88$, $p = .94$). An increase in existential questioning diminishes the chances to be engaged ($\beta = -.24$, $SE = .12$, Wald (1) = 4.20, $p = .04$, $\text{Exp}(\beta) = .79$).

Discussion

This study was intended to investigate the relation between existential questioning and romantic investment. This is a way to shed light on the relations between open-mindedness and happiness but also between open-mindedness and social relations. Results showed that existential quest is negatively linked to romantic attitudes, especially to intimacy and engagement. This is due, for intimacy, to the links between existential questioning and insecure attachment as well as between existential questioning and neuroticism. Concerning romantic engagement, the link is explained by the mediation of insecure attachment only,

more precisely, of attachment avoidance. Finally, the more a person is engaged in existential questioning, the less chance he has to be engaged in a romantic relationship.

Classic theories on attachment describe secure attachment as a basis for exploration (Bowlby, 1969). On the basis of our results, we suggest that if exploration goes too far, attachment becomes insecure and this disturbs romantic relationships. Uncertainty is not easy to share; this could be the reason why existential questioning increases attachment avoidance and, as a consequence, hinders intimacy and engagement in romantic relationships. In the same way, doubt can contaminate internal working models, and the attachment anxiety which results can disturb relationships.

This research also makes a connection between two features of a questioning attitude. The first is negative relations with emotional well-being. Previous researches showed that the process of searching for meaning in life is linked to neuroticism, depression (Steger et al., 2008), and a diminution of life satisfaction (Park, Park, and Peterson, 2010). The second feature is social isolation. Religious people with a questioning attitude report feeling misunderstood and alienated from members of their group (Graham et al., 2008). More generally, people searching for meaning in life are dissatisfied with their social relationships (Steger et al, 2008). Our mediational results reinforce these previous findings and suggest that the link between existential questioning and probably the most important of social relations, that is to say romantic relations, can be explained by a negative emotional state.

However, this study shows several limitations. The first is that no causal link was proved. Causality can be postulated on the base of the idea that existential questioning begins during adolescence and serious romantic relations later, but it remains speculative. A second limitation is the magnitude of the effects. This could be due to the precision of the processes in question. Existential questioning is a very specific form of open-mindedness. In the same way, romantic intimacy and engagement are specific components of romantic relations.

Results have thus to be consolidated with future researches on open-mindedness and attachment.

Finally, our results have important clinical implications. Psychotherapists who receive couples in crisis have here a new working field to develop with clients. Specifically, beyond communication or love processes, each partner's way of building meaning for existence can be at the origin of a couple's disfunctionning.

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