

Codependency and Relationship Dimensions

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Overview

Despite its popularity among clinical circles, the codependency model is controversial and under-researched within an empirical context. To further bridge the gap between the clinical and empirical spheres of relationship psychology, the present study administered a codependency survey to a small sample size of 8 college students and compared the results to existing data from these students on various relationship dimensions derived from the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR).

Background Research

Literature Review of the Codependency Model

Historical Evolution

- Origins unclear- Cermack (1986) speculates “codependency” evolved from “co-alcoholism” to describe the wives of alcoholic men.
- Later definitions expand beyond one gender/type of relationship e.g., “a dysfunctional pattern of relating to others with an extreme focus outside of oneself, lack of expression of feelings, and personal meaning derived from relationships with others” (Fischer and Spann, 1997).

- Despite continued lack of empirical attention, the codependency model gains popularity in clinical/self help circles beginning in the 1980's as a “social movement and big business” (Collins, 1993)

- Codependency measures by Marks et al. (2012) and Fischer & Spann (1991) yield higher codependency scores for Codependents Anonymous (CodA) members than among the general population

- Still no standardized codependency definition, despite attempts by Morgan (1991), Marks et al. (2012), and others to include it in the DSM

Gender and Cultural Considerations

- Collins (1993) argues that the codependency model pathologizes femininity and female emphasis on interpersonal relationships.

- Experiments by Cowan & Warren (1994) and Dear & Roberts (2002) find negative female stereotyped traits (i.e., approval seeking, low self-esteem) better predict codependency than gender itself, despite slightly higher female prevalence

- Large experiments by Gotham & Sher (1995) and Irwin (1995) yield no significant gender differences for codependency

- Chang (2010) measures codependency among Taiwanese and American students- finds higher male codependency scores for both groups

- Collectivist values predict higher levels of codependency (Chang, 2010)

Relationship/Familial Dysfunction and Attachment Style

- Counter to traditional understandings of codependent behavior as stemming from familial alcoholism and abuse, Carr (1999) finds subtle areas of familial dysfunction (e.g., task accomplishment + affective expression) are often at play

- Wells et. al. (2006), Chang (2010), Springer et. al. (1998) find overall negative correlation between codependency and a secure attachment style.

- This research yields mixed results on the specific relationship between codependency and the two dimensions of attachment style (i.e., anxiety about abandonment and avoidance of intimacy). Only Chang (2010) finds higher anxiety about abandonment.

- Wright & Wright (1991) distinguish between codependency as a short-term adaptive strategy in the face of stressful relationships vs. a consistent mode of relating

Hypotheses

H1: There will be no correlation between gender and codependency

H2: There will be a strong positive relationship between codependency and anxiety about abandonment

H3: There will be a strong positive relationship between codependency and avoidance of intimacy

H4: There will be a strong negative relationship between codependency and self-esteem

H5: There will be a negative relationship between codependency and positive family interactions

H6: There will be a positive relationship between codependency and the agape (altruistic) love style

H7: There will be no correlation between experience with “problem relationships” (defined as a romantic partner or close family member with substance abuse or serious mental health issues)

Method

Participants

8 undergraduate students from Psych 423 (2 male, 6 female)

Instruments and Procedure

A 20-item survey was compiled from clinical self-tests for codependency from NorthPoint Recovery and LastDoor (Chronbach's alpha=.89). Participants were given the choice of answering the questions based on different relationships. All participants reported answering based on a romantic partner, while 2 additionally answered based on a parent, and 3 additionally answered based on a close friend.

Participants' gender, anxiety about abandonment, avoidance of intimacy, self-esteem, love style, and positive interactions with family members were assessed through the Experiences in Close Relationships scales, which had been administered earlier in the semester.

The relationships between codependency scores and 6 ECR variables were analyzed using Spearman's correlation. A one-way ANOVA was used to assess gender differences.

Descriptive Survey Data

While the 20 codependency items were assessed through a 5-point Likert scale, the survey also asked open-ended questions about the 8 participants' relationship history.

- 7 of 8 had been in a romantic relationship in the past
- 6 of 7 had relationships that lasted for at least one year.
- 5 of 8 were currently in relationships.
- 5 of 8 had been in a relationship with a partner who suffered from substance abuse or serious mental illness
- 4 of 8 reported growing up in proximity to a parent, family member, or close friend who struggled with these issues.

Sample Item:

I believe it is my job to fix, manage, and hold my relationships together.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

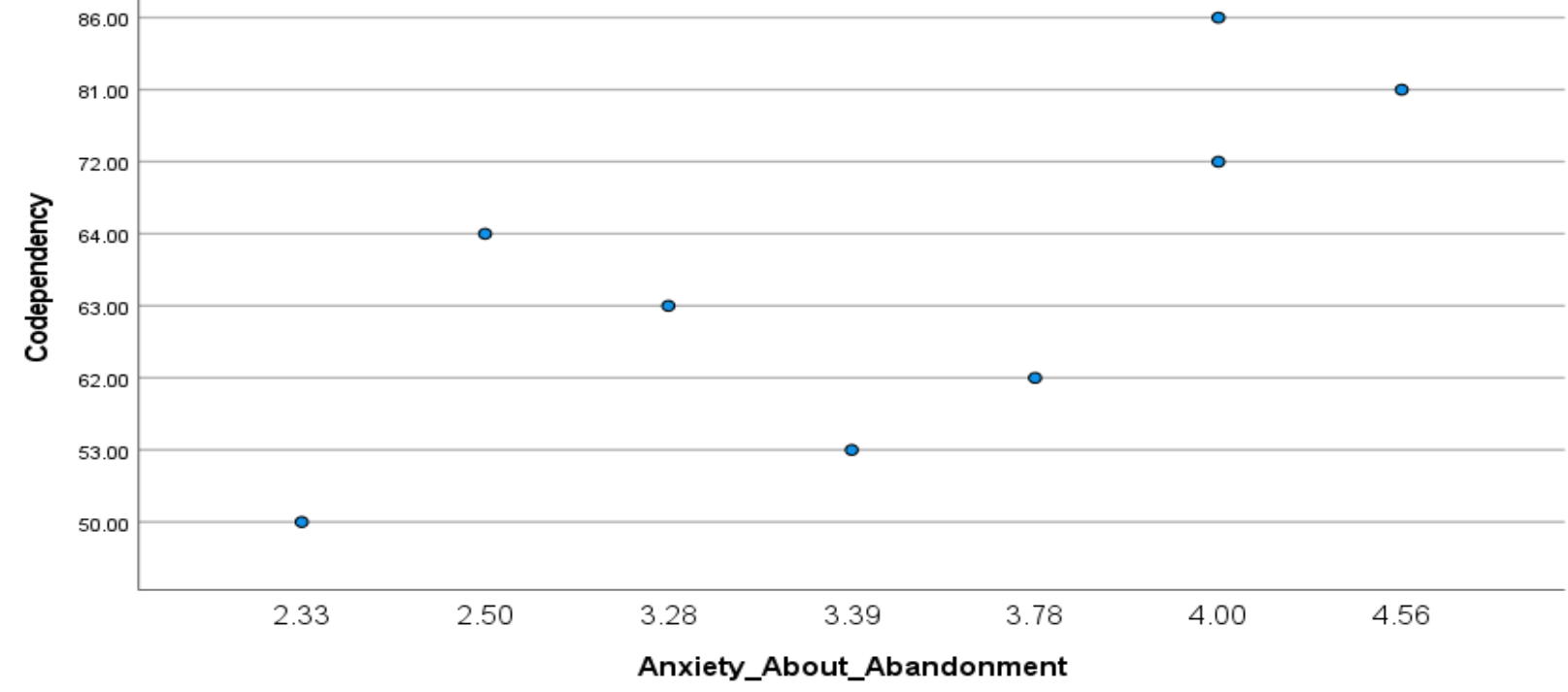
H1: Gender results **H1 Supported?** ☒ **Significant?** ☒
(Codependency Scale 1-100)

Mean female score: 66 σ = 10.7 F = .006 p = .943

Mean male score: 67 σ = 19.799

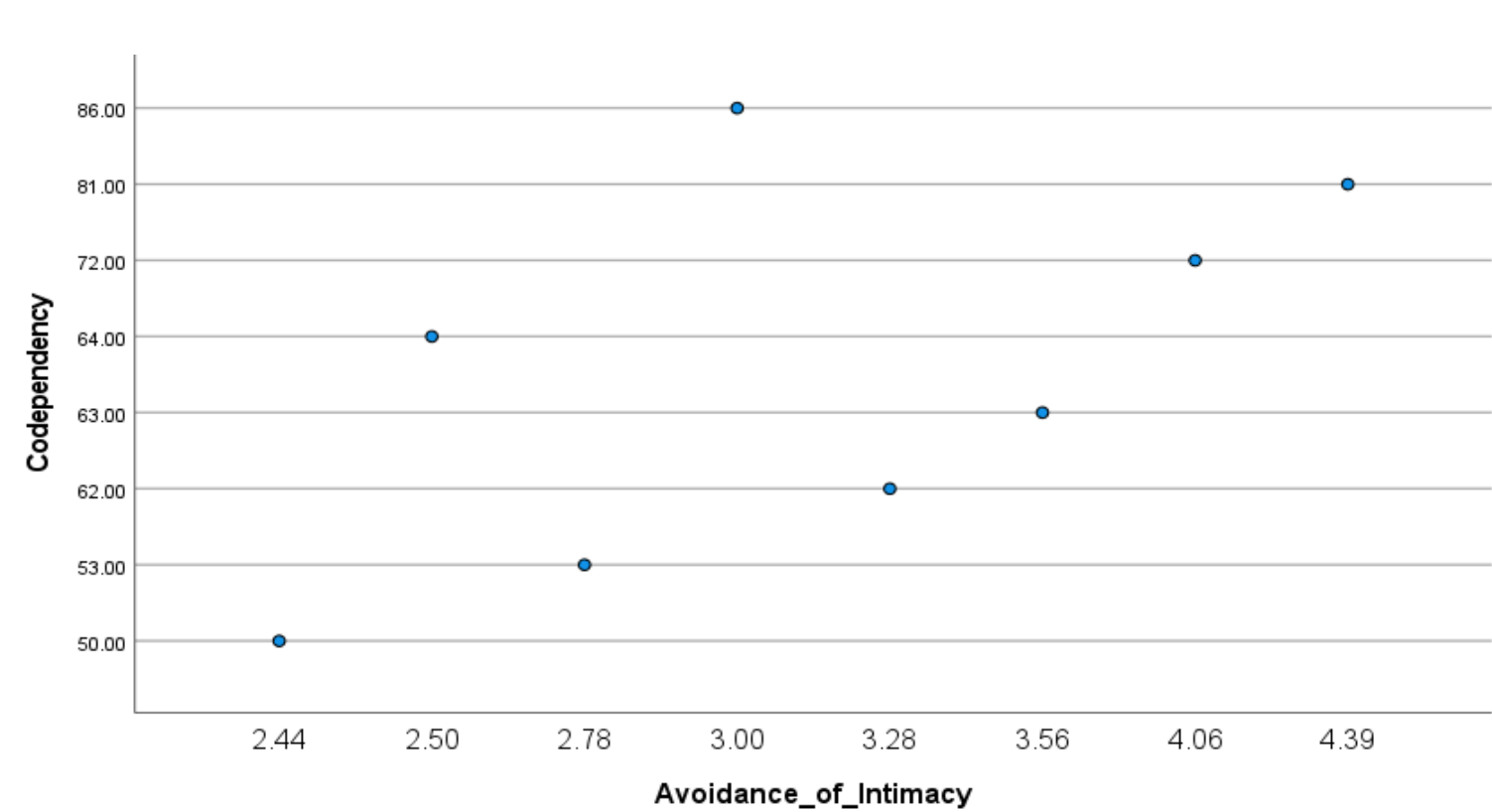
Relationship Results

H2: Codependency and Anxiety About Abandonment



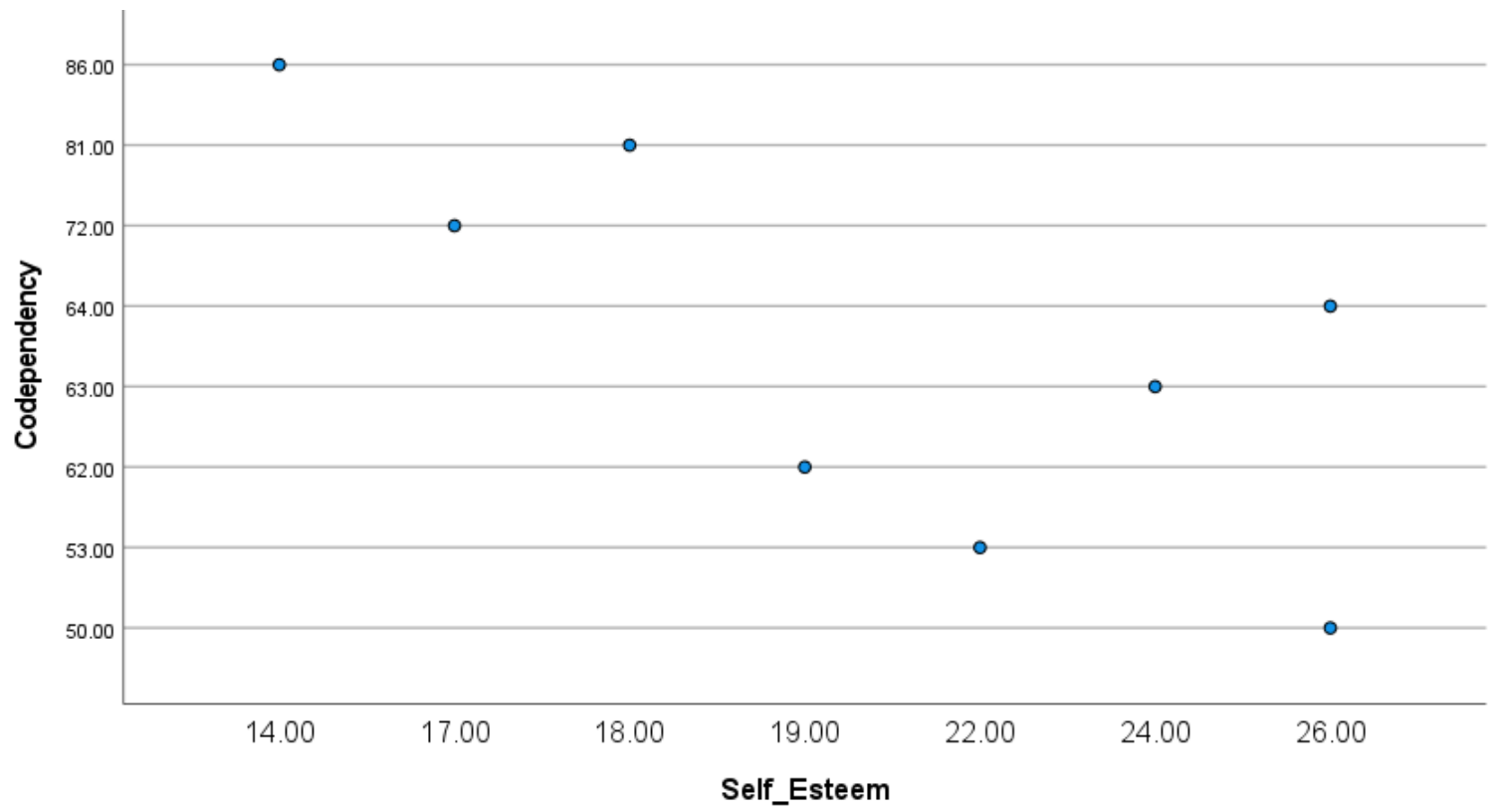
r = .838 **H2 supported?** ☒ **Significant?** ☒ ($p < .05$)

H2: Codependency and Avoidance of Intimacy



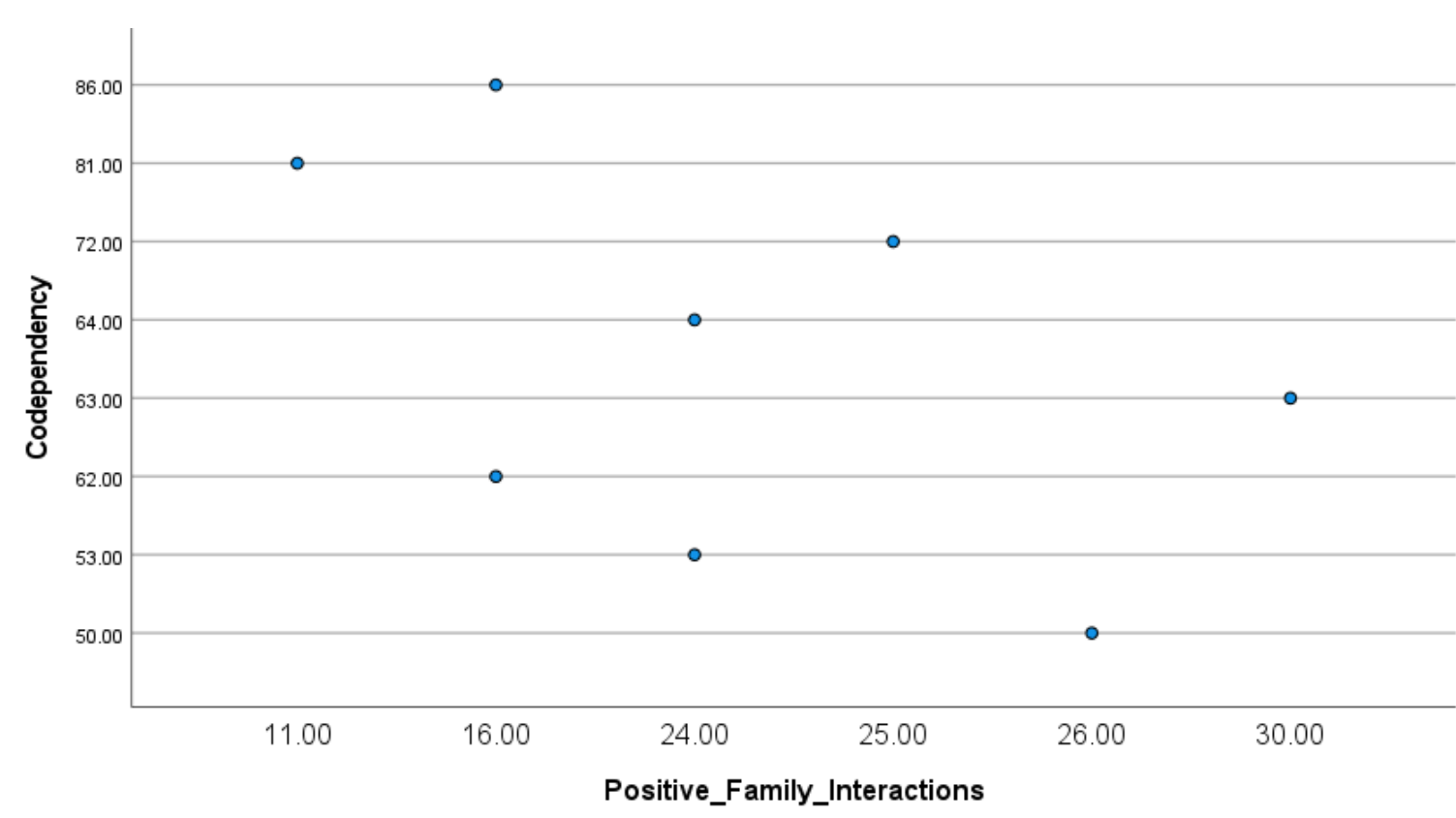
r = .571 **H3 supported?** ☒ **Significant?** ☒ ($p > .05$)

H4: Codependency and Self Esteem



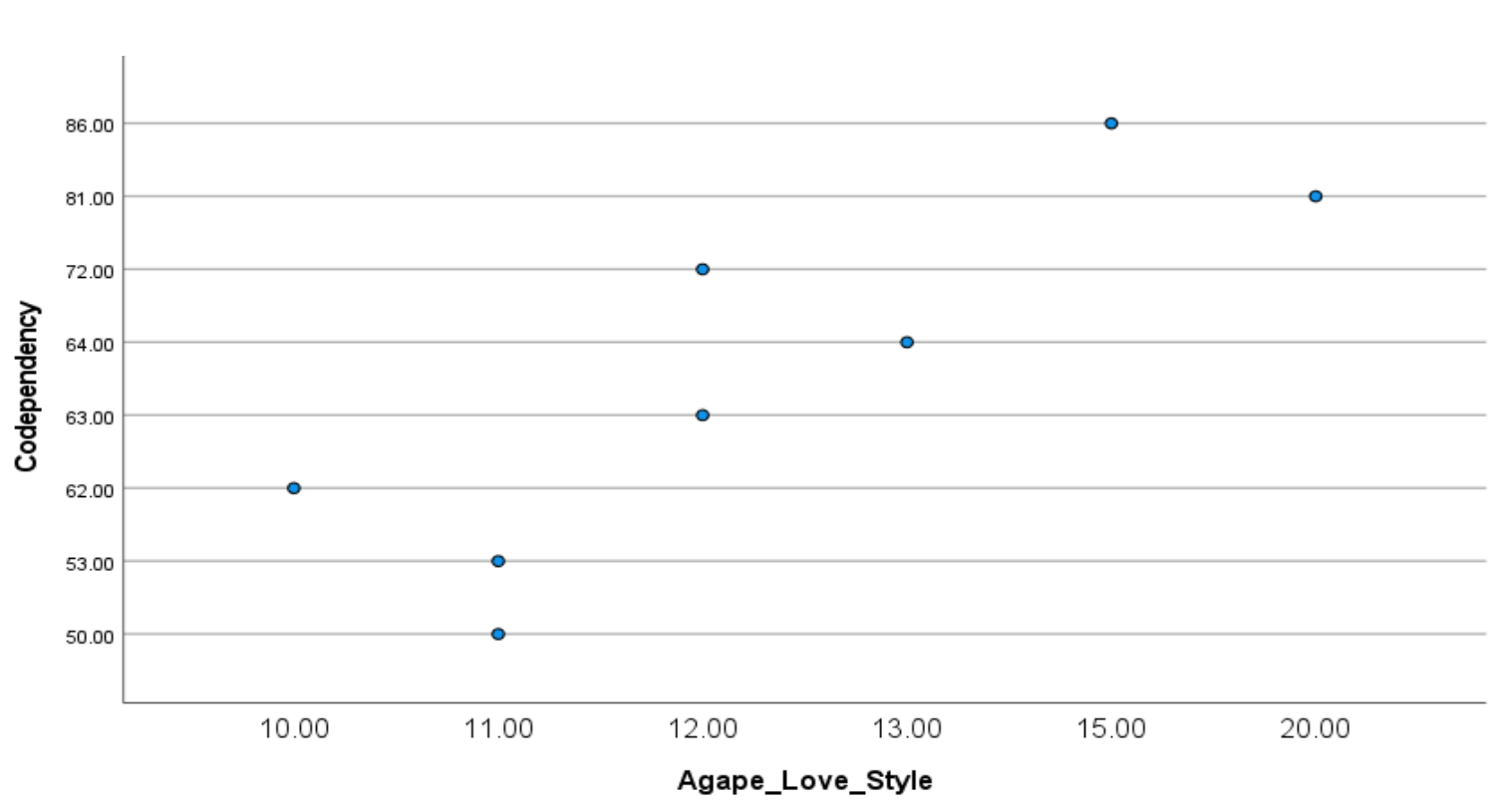
r = -.719 **H4 supported?** ☒ **Significant?** ☒ ($p < .05$)

H5: Codependency and Positive Family Interactions



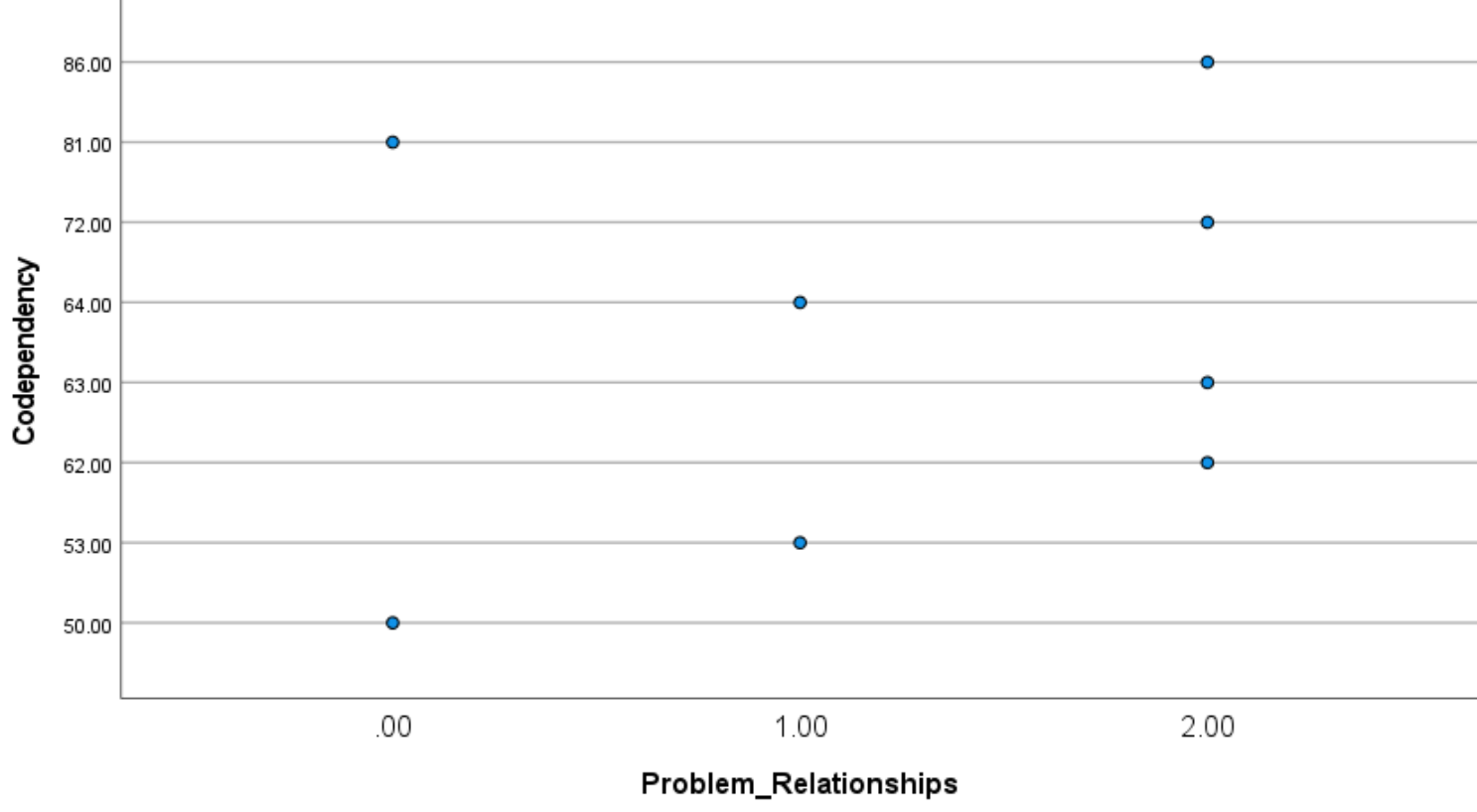
r = -.506 **H5 supported?** ☒ **Significant?** ☒ ($p > .05$)

H6: Codependency and Agape Love Style



r = .855 **H6 Supported?** ☒ **Significant?** ☒ ($p < .01$)

H7: Codependency and Problem Relationships



r = .283 **H7 supported?** ☒ **Significant?** ☒ ($p > .05$)

Conclusions

- Despite a very small sample size, each hypothesis was supported, except Hypothesis 2. Only some results were statistically significant.

- Correlation for self-esteem & anxiety about abandonment reflect established empirical research.

- Weak correlation for avoidance of intimacy consistent with Chang (2020), conflicts with Wells et al. (2006) and Springer et al. (1998).

- Small gender differences reflect Cowan & Warren (1994) and Dear & Roberts (2002), higher male codependency reflects Chang (2010).

- Weak, non-significant negative correlation for positive family interactions could reflect influence of subtle familial dysfunction (Carr, 1999).

- Similarly weak results for problem relationships could reflect codependency as a mode of relating (Wright & Wright, 1991), but questions may have been too broad.

- Conclusions limited due to sample size, but consistent with existing research.

- Codependency model requires further empirical attention in light of its clinical popularity

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