



Original Article

## The relationship between communication skills and early maladaptive schemas in university students

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMSs) are emotional and cognitive self-harming patterns formed at the beginning of growth and evolution in mind, and they are repeated and stabilized on the path of life; also, they have a lot of improper functions. This study examined the relationship between communication skills and EMSs in undergraduate students.

**Materials and Methods:** In this descriptive-analytical and correlational study, using stratified random sampling, 366 participants were selected from students of Islamic Azad University of Rasht in 2019, completed a communication skills questionnaire, demographic questions, as well as the Young Schemas Questionnaire (Early Maladaptive Schemas Questionnaire-short version). Data were then analyzed by SPSS software, t-test and Pearson's correlation coefficient methods.

**Results:** The majority of participants were female (79%), single (86.9%), and studying in humanities (73.8%). They aged 18 to 43 years (79.5%). Also, the results indicate a negative relationship between communication skills and EMS, which is statistically significant ( $P \leq 0.01$ ).

**Conclusion:** Based on the findings, it is concluded that the university students who had more early maladaptive schemas showed poor communication skills.

**Keywords:** Communication, Interpersonal skills, Schemas therapy, Social abilities, Social skills

### Please cite this paper as:

Kosar Shafiei Rezvani Nejad K, Mirpour ZS, Azizi A, Sheikholeslami F, Rahmati F. The relationship between communication skills and early maladaptive schemas in university students. *Journal of Fundamentals of Mental Health* 2021 Sep-Oct; 23(5): 323-329.

### Introduction

Early Maladaptive Schemas (EMSs) are deep, inclusive, and inefficient patterns, which formed in childhood or adolescence and their continuity in adulthood, as the deepest level of cognition which person is usually unaware of that (1). According to Beck, individuals' mindsets are composed of schemas that include memories, problem-solving techniques, mental and oral images, and a coherent system of

cognitive, affective, emotional, and behavioral components (2). The Young Early Maladaptive Schemas Questionnaire is a famous theory in this field. It is generally argued that the EMSs are emotional and cognitive patterns of self-harm that are formed in the mind at the beginning of development are repeated and established during the lifetime, and have a largely inappropriate function (3,4). Young believed that EMSs arise because the five basic

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Received: Feb. 25, 2021

Accepted: Jul. 23, 2021

emotional needs were not met, including the need for secure attachment in childhood. If parents, especially mothers do not act optimally in creating a secure attachment, the children will be prone to creating EMSs in one or more development areas that can affect important life decisions as well as adulthood behaviors (5-7). On the other hand, communication skills shape the individuals' relationships and affect their mental health (8,9).

According to the research, factors such as communication skills (establishing an optimal connection, assertiveness, cooperation, self-disclosure, termination, listening, reward and reinforcement, reflection, explanation, and problem solving) and determining and recognizing the personal values play significant roles in the prevention or reduction of abnormal types of behavioral-social abnormalities, and mental and personality disorders in adolescents (10). A study by Rahsepar et al. demonstrates that social acceptance and emotional schemas have an intermediary role in relations between family communication patterns and students' academic motivation (11). Khodabakhshi et al. compared the cognitive maladaptive schemas, irrational beliefs, and communication skills in the orphanage and non-orphanage adolescents. The results indicated the significant differences between two groups in total scores of EMSs and subscales, namely emotional deprivation, abandonment/ instability, mistrust/ misbehavior, social isolation/ alienation, defectiveness/ shame, failure, dependence/ incompetence, self-vulnerability, and respect. However, the total scores of irrational beliefs and communication skills showed no significant difference between the two groups. Only the decisiveness sub-scale in the component skills showed a significant difference (12).

In the research by Janovsky et al. there is a relation between EMSs and interpersonal problems (13). Faustino and Vasco, demonstrate that there is a relationship between emotional processing problems and EMSs with adjusting psychological needs (14).

Communication skills are essential for everyone's development and affect the human relations (15,16). Furthermore, the human relationships without communication are like an image that has not been developed, or its details and boundaries are not determined (16,17). Schemas directly affect relationships with others (18). Mirpur et al. reported that dark

personality traits lack proper social and interpersonal functioning, that is, lack of communication skills. Dark personality traits are inflexible, which also put people in the wrong abusive relationships (19).

Since it is hoped that young people have healthy relationships, get married, or enter the job market after completing academic studies, their multiple roles in society as adults can be important and future-making. At this stage, measuring the relationship between EMSS and communication skills will create sparks of hope for training before selecting and influencing important roles by them at the following stages. Considering the lack of studies in this field in our country, the present study aimed to determine the relationships between communication skills and early maladaptive schemas in university students.

### Materials and Methods

The statistical community of this descriptive-analytical and correlational study consisted of 14556 undergraduate students who studying in five faculties (Humanities, Basic Sciences, Management, Engineering and Technology, and Nursing and Midwifery) of the Islamic Azad University of Rasht city-Iran in 2019. Based on Krejcie and Morgan formula (20), we selected 366 individuals through performed the stratified sampling method. The first author calculated the necessary sample size for each faculty by Krejcie and Morgan table as follows: Faculty of Humanities (n= 270), Faculty of Basic Sciences (n= 49), Faculty of Management (n= 22), Faculty of Technology and Engineering (n= 18), and Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery (n= 7). Then, the volunteers who met the inclusion criteria (being undergraduate student, willingness to participate, and not having a diagnosed mental disorder (according to their self-report)) were entered. Deputy of Research and Technology of Guilan University of Medical Sciences approved the present study (the code of ethics No. IR.GUMS.REC.1398.487). Then the researchers explained the goals and methods for the students. Also, all participants signed the informed consent form.

### Research instrument

A) *Demographic Characteristics Checklist*: It had items about gender, age, marital status, number of children in the family, employment status, school year, faculty, father's education

level, mother's education level, father's job, and mother's job.

*B) Communication Skills Questionnaire:* This questionnaire developed by Karami and Attarha (21). It consisted of 34 items, including three subscales, namely the emotion management (12 items), perception of others (12 items), and assertiveness (10 items). The validity and reliability of the questionnaire were confirmed with Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.92, and the range of Cronbach's alpha coefficient was from 0.51 to 0.90. Karami and Attarha examined its reliability and validity in 2007. Cronbach's alpha coefficients of all three components were 0.88, 0.79, and 0.70, respectively (18,21).

*C) Young Schema Questionnaire-Short Form (YSQ-SF):* The third part of this questionnaire which developed in 1998, evaluates 15 early maladaptive schemas. It is a self-descriptive tool that included 75 questions with six options. The reliability and validity of the tool have been proven in many studies (22,23). The reliability of the scale was 0.96 for the whole test and 0.80 for all subscales using Cronbach's alpha (23).

Ahi (2005) performed the psychometric evaluation of the questionnaire at the University of Tehran. The internal consistency was equal to 0.97 for the female population and 0.98 for the male population according to the Cronbach's alpha (24).

After collecting data, we coded and inserted the data into SPSS 22. Finally, we used the frequency, mean, and standard deviation to describe the quantitative variables with normal distribution and the inferential T-test and Pearson correlation coefficient. The statistical significance level of tests was  $P < 0.05$ .

## Results

Based on the descriptive results indicated most of the respondents were female (79%), single (86.9%), the second child (34.2%), student of the Faculty of Humanities (73.8%), in their third year (30.3%); and a significant number of them (79.5%) aged 18 to 43 years. Table 1 and 2 indicate the results related to the components of students' communication and maladaptive schemas.

**Table 1.** Descriptive indices and T-test to assess the components of students' communication

Variable	M	SD	Cut line	T	DF	P
Emotion management	40.48	5.07	36	16.8	360	0.01
Perception of others	41.21	4.67	36	21.25	360	0.01
Self-assertiveness	34.69	3.67	36	24.40	360	0.01

The results of Table 1 indicated that communication skills in emotion management, perception of others, and students' self-

assertiveness were desirable and more than the average.

**Table 2.** Descriptive indices and T-test to assess the students' maladaptive schemas

Variable	M	SD	Cut line	T	DF	P
Disconnection and rejection	61.05	21.81	75	-12.19	362	0.01
Autonomy and impaired performance	41.77	18.75	60	-18.5	361	0.01
Impaired limit	31.89	9.49	30	3.8	361	0.01
Other-directedness	27.33	9.17	30	-5.55	362	0.01
Hypervigilance	32.37	9.45	30	4.8	364	0.01
Early Maladaptive schemas (Total)	194.54	56.15	225	-10.19	361	0.01

The status of students' EMSs was less than average and desirable in disconnection and rejection, autonomy, impaired performance, other-directedness, and the whole schema, and more than average and undesirable in the

impaired limit and hypervigilance (Table 2). Table 3 and 4 indicate the correlation between early maladaptive schemas with communication skills.

**Table 3.** Correlation between early maladaptive schemas with students' communication skills

Variable	Correlation coefficient	P
Disconnection and rejection	-0.47	0.01
Impaired autonomy and performance	-0.40	0.01
Impaired limit	-0.27	0.01
Other-directedness	-0.23	0.01
Hypervigilance	-0.22	0.01

**Table 4.** Correlation between early maladaptive schemas with students' communication skills components

Schema domains	Communication skills	Correlation coefficient	P
Disconnection and rejection	Emotion management	-0.45	0.01
	Perception of others	-0.32	0.01
	Self-assertiveness	-0.30	0.01
Impaired autonomy and performance	Emotion management	-0.33	0.01
	Perception of others	-0.30	0.01
	Self-assertiveness	-0.29	0.01
Impaired limit	Emotion management	-0.33	0.01
	Perception of others	-0.16	0.01
	Self-assertiveness	-0.11	0.01
Other-directedness	Emotion management	-0.25	0.01
	Perception of others	-0.17	0.01
	Self-assertiveness	-0.22	0.01
Hypervigilance	Emotion management	-0.26	0.01
	Perception of others	-0.16	0.01
	Self-assertiveness	-0.15	0.01

## Discussion

The results of this research indicated that there were relationships between EMSs and communication skills in undergraduate students. The findings were consistent with results of Mohammadi et al. study. The results demonstrate that there is a relationship between communication skills and early maladaptive schemas in nurses. The nurses who have EMSs show the weakest communication skills (25). This is consistent with the findings in a study by Rahsepar et al. They found that negative emotional schemas, directly and through social acceptance reduces academic motivation; however, positive emotional schema only directly raises academic motivation. Overall, the findings of their study confirmed that social acceptance and emotional schemas played a mediating role in the relationship between family communication patterns and students' academic motivation(11).

Janovsky et al. worked on 49 empirical studies and reviewed investigation of EMSs and interpersonal problems. EMSs were found to have a moderate positive association with interpersonal problems with dissimilar EMSs having small to moderate effect sizes. There has been limited evidence supporting an ultimate

effect of EMSs on interpersonal problems till now (13).

Faustino and Vasco proved that the emotional schemas may be associated with a tendency for experiential avoidance of self-criticism, self-rejection/shame, and internal reality which may damage the regulation of psychological needs. These variables may be targets of integrative case conceptualization and clinical decision making focused on patient's needs, styles of communication and timings (14).

Meneguzzo et al., provided evidence that patients with anorexia nervosa may be ineffective in expressing their mood in exclusive and over inclusive social situations. Specific cognitive/temperamental schemas might play a role in the way people communicate their feelings, and they could be considered targets for psychotherapy interventions to improve emotional recognition/communication and social interpretation (26).

Sayyadi et al. revealed that the impacts of early maladaptive schemas and conflict solving styles (integration style and compromise style) were significant on relationship beliefs. In addition, in the relationship between maladaptive early schemas and relationship

beliefs, the effective conflict solving styles had a mediating role (27).

According to the research findings, the effective social skills have roots in the individuals' logical thinking; and much of discomfort of people and their unstable emotional life have roots in all kinds of irrational and unrealistic beliefs about oneself and the surrounding world. EMSs are emotional and cognitive patterns of self-harm that are formed in the mind at the beginning of development and are repeated and established during the life and largely have inappropriate functions (28). Failure to satisfy essential emotional needs is a root of developing the EMSs. Young believes that early maladaptive schemas often occur due to unfulfilled five childhood development needs: 1. Secure attachment to others (including the need for security, stability, love, support, and acceptance); 2. Autonomy, sufficiency, and sense of identity; 3. Being free to express rational and healthy needs and emotions; 4. Self-motivation and fun; and 5. Realistic limitations and restraint (12).

The results revealed that students with poorer communication skills had more maladaptive schemas. The result was consistent with Young's theory who indicated that those with disconnection and rejection schemas could not establish safe and satisfactory attachment with others (29).

The *impaired autonomy and performance schemas* are basic requirement which mean a person's ability to separate from the family and independent performance cannot be seen in families in which the parents reduce their children's confidence. This is due to their parenting styles. That is parents either support their children excessively or decrease their support that can be interpreted as negligence. Over-protecting their children, therefore, does not allow them to be independent and responsible (30). In addition, in families in which parents are controlling and critical and induce children a sense of helplessness and shame, children's needs for adequacy and identity are not met.

They feel that they could not perform their daily responsibilities to an acceptable level without the help of others. The continuation of this educational pattern makes it impossible for individuals to imagine separate identities for themselves from their parents. Therefore, they

feel emptiness, confusion, and incompetence, and feel that they have failed (31).

People with the over vigilance and inhibition schemas excessively repel their inner feelings and have self-motivated impulses. Their expectations and internal laws are too strict about the ethical behavior and performance which prevent them from establishing the intimate and happy relationships with other and having peace of mind. These patients usually experience pessimism, anxiety, and fear in a way that they believe that they can be self-conscious at all moments of life otherwise their lives fall apart (32).

People, who have *other-directedness schemas*, seek to satisfy the needs of others instead of addressing their own. They do this to gain approval, maintain an emotional relationship, or avoid any revenge. In social relationships, these people tend to emphasize the responses of others more than their own needs, and are oftentimes unaware of their own anger and desires. As children, they had not been free to follow their natural inclinations, and in the adulthood, they are influenced by the external environment and follow the wishes of others instead of being directed from inside (33).

People, who have *impaired limit schemas*, have impaired responsibilities and personal limitations, such as responsibility for others or orientation towards their long-term goals of life. This schema leads to several problems concerning the rights of others, including commitment to goals and achieving realistic goals. Furthermore, people who have impaired limit schemas cannot show self-control, endure failure well enough to achieve their goals, nor can control the expression of their emotions and impulses (34).

Regarding mentioned issues, the early maladaptive schemas are able to affect the individuals' evaluation and reduce their ability to face problems.

The more active schema is related to the more negative emotions one experiences when the schema is evoked. This results in vulnerabilities, psychological and personality disorders, and affects one's communication skills.

In the present study, except for the dishonesty of the participants in answering (which is a feature of the questionnaire), there seems to be no limit that cannot be controlled.

## Conclusion

In general, it is concluded that the university students who had more early maladaptive schemas showed poor communication skills. Based on the results, more attention to students' maladaptive schemas is effective to improve students' communication skills.

## Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the esteemed officials and staff of Razi Clinical Research Development Center and all individuals who cooperated in the present study, and especially thanks to Dr. Hamed Shafiei Rezvani Nejad for editing the manuscript. The authors declare any conflict of interest and financial support.

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