

The Relationship Between Early Maladaptive Schemas, Attachment Quality, and Depression Symptoms in Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between early maladaptive schemas, attachment quality, and depressive symptoms in adolescents in Tehran.

Methods and Materials: This descriptive-correlational study was conducted on 385 adolescents aged 13 to 18 years in Tehran, selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Beck Depression Inventory-II, the Young Schema Questionnaire-Short Form, and the Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire. Data analysis was performed using Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis with SPSS-27.

Findings: Pearson correlation results indicated a significant negative correlation between attachment quality and depressive symptoms ($r = -0.46$, $p < 0.01$), and a significant positive correlation between all domains of early maladaptive schemas and depression (highest for disconnection and rejection, $r = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$). Linear regression analysis revealed that attachment quality and five domains of early maladaptive schemas collectively explained 37% of the variance in depressive symptoms ($R^2 = 0.37$, $F(6, 378) = 35.14$, $p < 0.01$).

Conclusion: These findings suggest that both attachment quality and the intensity of early maladaptive schemas play crucial roles in predicting depressive symptoms in adolescents, highlighting the importance of addressing these factors in preventive and therapeutic interventions.

Keywords: *Early maladaptive schemas, Attachment quality, Depression, Adolescents*

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental period marked by significant cognitive, emotional, and social changes, making individuals particularly vulnerable to psychological issues such as depression (Shi et al., 2024). Depressive symptoms during adolescence not only affect current emotional well-being but can also lead to long-term impairments in academic, interpersonal, and occupational functioning (Batihan & Kaya, 2024). Understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying depression in this stage is crucial for early detection and intervention. Among the cognitive vulnerabilities that have been widely studied, early maladaptive schemas have gained considerable attention. These enduring and pervasive themes or patterns, originating from unmet emotional needs in childhood, are believed to predispose individuals to various psychological disorders including depression (Karaush & Kupriyanova, 2022).

Schema theory suggests that dysfunctional cognitive structures, when activated, can lead to emotional distress and maladaptive behaviors. Numerous studies have documented the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and depressive symptoms, indicating that the stronger the maladaptive schemas, the greater the severity of depressive symptoms (Tariq et al., 2021). Moreover, the quality of attachment relationships formed early in life has been identified as a pivotal factor influencing emotional regulation and vulnerability to depression (Iwanski et al., 2021). Secure attachment relationships serve as protective factors against emotional disorders, while insecure attachment styles may increase the risk of depression (Venta et al., 2014).

Recent research has emphasized the interplay between cognitive schemas and attachment styles in the development and maintenance of depression. For instance, individuals with insecure attachment may develop maladaptive schemas that subsequently exacerbate depressive symptoms (Olave et al., 2024; Rodríguez et al., 2020). Additionally, cross-cultural studies have shown that the association between early maladaptive schemas, attachment quality, and depression is consistent across different cultural contexts (Lozova & Литвиненко, 2019; Zonnevrijl & Hildebrand, 2018).

In Iran, empirical studies have also supported the relationship between early maladaptive schemas, parenting styles, emotional regulation strategies, and depression (Ghasemkhanloo et al., 2022; Razavi et al., 2024). Research findings indicate that early maladaptive schemas not only

directly influence depressive symptoms but also mediate the effects of dysfunctional parenting and attachment experiences on psychological outcomes (Mousavi & Low, 2015; Sara Aman Alah Khani et al., 2024). Other studies suggest that schema-based interventions can significantly reduce depressive symptoms, underscoring the clinical relevance of targeting maladaptive cognitive structures in therapy (Ghasemkhanloo et al., 2022).

The integrated perspective highlights that both early maladaptive schemas and attachment quality are crucial in understanding the etiology and persistence of depressive symptoms in adolescence (Alba & Calvete, 2019; Özaslan et al., 2024). However, few studies have simultaneously examined the contribution of these two constructs in a single model. Thus, the present study aimed to investigate the relationship between early maladaptive schemas, attachment quality, and depressive symptoms in adolescents, contributing to the growing body of literature and providing implications for prevention and intervention programs.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a descriptive-correlational design. The participants included 385 adolescents aged between 13 and 18 years from Tehran, selected using a convenience sampling method. The sample size was determined based on the Morgan and Krejcie sample size table. Data were collected using three standardized instruments: the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II) to assess depressive symptoms, the Young Schema Questionnaire-Short Form (YSQ-SF) to evaluate early maladaptive schemas, and the Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire (ECR) to measure attachment quality. The BDI-II consists of 21 items scored on a four-point scale, the YSQ-SF includes 75 items covering 15 schemas across five domains, and the ECR contains 36 items assessing two attachment dimensions: anxiety and avoidance. All instruments had previously demonstrated good validity and reliability in Iranian populations. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS-27. Pearson correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationship between depressive symptoms and each independent variable. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict depressive symptoms based on attachment quality and the five domains of early maladaptive schemas.

Findings

Descriptive statistics showed that the mean score for depressive symptoms was 24.37 (SD = 8.52), and the mean

score for attachment quality was 98.45 (SD = 15.26). Among early maladaptive schema domains, the highest mean score was found for impaired autonomy and performance ($M = 72.54$, $SD = 13.43$), while the lowest mean belonged to other-directedness ($M = 58.36$, $SD = 12.71$).

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant negative correlation between attachment quality and depressive symptoms ($r = -0.46$, $p < 0.01$). Positive and significant correlations were found between depressive symptoms and all five schema domains, with disconnection and rejection showing the highest correlation ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$), followed by impaired autonomy and performance ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$), impaired limits ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$), emotional inhibition and over-vigilance ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$), and other-directedness ($r = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$).

Multiple regression analysis indicated that attachment quality and the five schema domains collectively explained 37% of the variance in depressive symptoms ($R^2 = 0.37$, $F(6, 378) = 35.14$, $p < 0.01$). Specifically, disconnection and rejection ($B = 0.29$, $\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$) and impaired autonomy and performance ($B = 0.25$, $\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$) were the strongest predictors. Attachment quality negatively predicted depressive symptoms ($B = -0.23$, $\beta = -0.26$, $p < 0.01$).

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate the significant roles of both early maladaptive schemas and attachment quality in predicting depressive symptoms among adolescents. Adolescents with higher levels of maladaptive schemas and lower attachment quality reported more severe depressive symptoms. These results underscore the importance of early emotional experiences and cognitive patterns in the development of depression during adolescence.

The study highlights the relevance of addressing maladaptive schemas and enhancing attachment security in preventive and therapeutic programs aimed at reducing depression among adolescents. By focusing on modifying dysfunctional cognitive structures and improving interpersonal relationships, interventions can be more effective in promoting mental health in this vulnerable population.

Moreover, the results suggest that comprehensive assessment of both cognitive and relational factors is essential for a better understanding of adolescent depression. Early interventions targeting these domains may not only alleviate current symptoms but also prevent the progression of depressive disorders into adulthood.

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