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## Impact of Early Maladaptive Schemas on Motivational and Cognitive Components of Relationships

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### Abstract

Early maladaptive schemas are cognitive structures formed in childhood, shaped by dysfunctional experiences that can lead to various behaviors often associated with mental disorders. This study investigates the role of maladaptive schemas in relational dynamics, focusing on cognitive and motivational structures. Key variables include: Self-determination: Assessed through autonomy and self-efficacy in relationships, categorized into autonomous, controlled, and impersonal dimensions; Normative beliefs about aggression: Evaluating maladaptive coping mechanisms, including both direct and indirect aggression. Trauma is acknowledged as a relevant factor in this model. Participants included adolescents and emerging adults (N = 214), aged 15 to 25, with nearly equal representation of male and female participants. Results indicate that higher levels of autonomous self-determination are associated with reduced normative beliefs regarding aggression. Overall, maladaptive schemas correlate with all forms of self-determination; specifically, disconnection/rejection and impaired autonomy schemas predict impersonal causality orientation, while impaired limits and overvigilance predict controlled self-determination. Using qualitative analysis alongside self-reported questionnaires, we explore the links between maladaptive schemas and individuals' attempts to construct a narrative identity that provides meaning to their lived experiences. Findings suggest that for individuals with maladaptive schemas, narrative identity construction differs significantly.

**Keywords:** early maladaptive schemas, self-determination, aggression, narrative identity, trauma, adolescent development, cognitive structures

## Introduction

Young (1999) introduces the concept of maladaptive schemas, which are cognitive structures formed during early childhood and may become dysfunctional over time. These schemas serve as a framework for processing experiences encountered in adolescence and subsequent stages of life. Early maladaptive schemas are defined as self-perpetuating, dysfunctional cognitive patterns that significantly influence an individual's emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and perceptions (Young et al., 2003). According to schema theory, these cognitive structures arise primarily during childhood and adolescence as a result of dysfunctional experiences.

Core Maladaptive Schemas (Young et al., 2003):

**Disconnection & Rejection Schema:** The schema is characterized by the expectation of unstable relationships, this schema is marked by intense feelings of isolation and a tendency to internalize the sense of inferiority. It manifests as a deep-seated belief that one is defective, unworthy of love, and inherently unlovable.

**Impaired Autonomy & Performance Schema:** This schema involves feelings of incompetence, failure, and vulnerability, leading individuals to become dependent on others due to perceived helplessness in facing adverse or catastrophic situations. It disrupts personal development by inhibiting the process of individuation.

**Impaired Limits Schema:** Individuals with this schema exhibit poor frustration tolerance and set unrealistic goals, often experiencing difficulty in achieving them. As a result of these unattainable expectations and a lack of effort toward their fulfillment, failure is frequent.

**Other-Directedness Schema:** This schema involves rigid expectations of oneself, often at the expense of one's spontaneous thoughts and emotions. It is associated with the belief that to be loved one must sacrifice personal needs to fulfill those of others.

Another theoretical framework informing this study is the **Self-Determination Theory** (Deci & Ryan, 1985), a motivational theory that emphasizes an individual's inherent tendency to exercise agency over their destiny and to feel responsible for both present and future outcomes. In the context of intimate relationships, self-determination is expressed through three distinct behavioral orientations: autonomous, controlling, and impersonal.

**Autonomous Orientation:** Individuals with this orientation engage in open communication and seek to understand their partner's perspective. Their motivation is centered on fostering relationship growth, and they experience positive emotions following discussions of

problematic issues, as they do not perceive such dialogues as threatening. Those with an autonomous orientation are active in supporting their partner's autonomy.

For women, this orientation is associated with a reduced tendency toward self-defense, while for men, it is linked to greater understanding (Knee, 2003).

**Controlled (Ego-Oriented) Orientation:** Individuals with this orientation respond defensively to conflict and tend to be reactive and inflexible. They perceive relationship conflicts as personal attacks, viewing these issues as reflections of their inadequacies. As a result, their primary motivation is to protect their ego, often leading to feelings of depression after discussions. To avoid negative emotions, they may avoid addressing problems altogether (Knee, 2003).

**Impersonal Orientation:** This orientation is marked by issues with self-efficacy and characterized by a sense of helplessness. Individuals with an impersonal orientation feel powerless and perceive a lack of resources necessary to achieve desired outcomes (Knee, 2003).

By incorporating the variable of self-determination into the analysis, this research provides a criterion for evaluating current trends in interpersonal relationships. It allows for the identification of behavioral tendencies among individuals and examines the extent to which maladaptive schemas influence these tendencies. Furthermore, it seeks to determine whether the groups distinguished by self-determination differ in their awareness and perception of violence within relationships.

Maladaptive cognitive schemas, along with specific self-determination styles, contribute to a heightened vulnerability to victimization. Cognitive processing features have been found to have significant associations with experiences of violence, particularly intimate partner violence. Studies indicate that women who have experienced spousal violence often employ cognitive strategies such as avoidance and rumination (Tufighi et al., 1999). Moreover, a lack of cognitive problem-solving strategies has been correlated with higher incidences of spousal abuse (Halford, 2001). In a survey of 600 women—half with a history of partner violence and half without—differences between the groups were observed in their use of cognitive-emotional regulation strategies, sexual satisfaction, and early maladaptive schemas (Ghahari, 2018).

According to schema theory, the disconnection & rejection cognitive schema is considered one of the most pervasive and powerful schemas, encompassing a wide range of behaviors (Young et al., 2003). Empirical evidence suggests that childhood abuse is strongly associated with continued victimization in adult partner relationships, a connection that is mediated by the activation of the disconnection & rejection schema.

The association between victimization and threat-related schemas has also been demonstrated in adolescents. For example, schemas related to rejection and separation are strongly linked to experiences of family and peer victimization (Calvete et al., 2003). Longitudinal studies further reveal that victims

of both real-life and cyberbullying tend to exhibit disconnection & rejection schema (Calvete, 2014; Calvete et al., 2016).

Within the framework of self-determination theory, researchers have hypothesized that various categories of self-determination are differentially related to intimate partner violence. Specifically, an autonomous self-determination style has been proposed as a protective factor against such violence (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Hove et al., 2010). In contrast, individuals with a controlling orientation tend to experience heightened levels of perceived threat, which increases the likelihood of aggressive behaviors. Due to poor emotional regulation, impersonal individuals may also exhibit reactive aggression (Øverup et al., 2017). Those with a controlling orientation are less flexible in their expectations and less likely to adapt to the dynamics of relationships, which correlates with a higher likelihood of experiencing partner violence (Neighbors et al., 2008; DiBello et al., 2013).

Additionally, individuals who have experienced violence, whether as victims or aggressors, tend to exhibit greater tolerance toward aggressive behavior (Basow et al., 2007). The perception of violence, as well as its association with maladaptive schemas and self-determination styles, forms a central focus of this research.

Traumatic experiences are significant correlates of both perceptions of violence and maladaptive schemas. For example, childhood trauma is strongly associated with physical partner violence in women (Fulu et al., 2017). Among men, experiences of partner violence are positively correlated with the perpetration of various forms of violence, whereas in women, any type of trauma is linked to revictimization (Fulu et al., 2017). Therefore, by including the variable of traumatic experiences in the research model, its effects can be thoroughly analyzed.

## Method

Using a convenience sampling method, data were collected from participants across three different age groups, with an equal distribution by gender (female N=113, 52.8%; male N=100, 46.7%; other N=1, 0.5%). Participants completed the questionnaires in the presence of the researcher, following both individual and group instructions. For participants aged 15–18 years, informed consent forms were sent electronically to parents or guardians. The entire procedure took approximately 20 to 25 minutes.

To investigate early maladaptive cognitive schemas, we utilized the short version of Young's Schema Questionnaire (YSQ-S3), based on Young's Schema Theory (Young et al., 2003). Unlike the long version (YSQ-L3), which contains 232 statements, the short version was adapted for quicker administration and research purposes, consisting of 90 statements that assess four maladaptive schemas. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for these schemas are presented in the table below.

## Appendix #1

### Cronbach's Alpha for Schema Subscales

| Subscales                        | Chrombach's alpha |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|
| Disconnection & Rejection Schema | 0.921             |
| Impaired Autonomy & Performance  | 0.932             |
| Impaired Limits Schema           | 0.83              |
| Other-Directedness Schema        | 0.84              |

An adapted version of the General Causal Orientation Scale (GCOS: Deci & Ryan, 1985; Overup et al., 2017) was used to examine relationship-related motivational tendencies. The scale presents ten different situations, in response to which participants rate three distinct action tendencies. The response options correspond to the three motivational orientations outlined in Self-Determination Theory: autonomous ( $\alpha = 0,86$ ), controlled ( $\alpha = 0,701$ ), and impersonal ( $\alpha = 0,723$ ).

The Scale of Normative Beliefs about Aggression (Huesmann et al., 1989) was incorporated by the research team to measure nonverbal aggression in provocative situations. Statements assessing indirect aggression were developed based on the Direct and Indirect Aggression Test (I-DAQ; Ruiz-Pamies et al., 2014). The overall internal consistency of the test is high, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.95.

The Trauma Questionnaire (ECHO-wide Cohort Version 01.20, 2018) consists of six questions that assess various traumatic experiences encountered throughout an individual's lifetime.

### Results and discussion

The study aimed to investigate whether different types and levels of maladaptive schemas were related to the motivational model of relationships, how these schemas influenced beliefs about aggression, and whether childhood trauma played a determining role within this model.

Impersonal causal orientation was associated with all four maladaptive schemas; however, two of these associations were of moderate strength: with impaired autonomy ( $r = .428$   $n = 206$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and with disconnection & Rejection ( $r = .481$   $n = 198$ ,  $p = .000$ ). As anticipated within the theoretical context, impaired autonomy signifies vulnerability, anticipation of danger, timidity, negativism, and dependency. The impersonal type is characterized by passivity resulting from a lack of confidence in one's abilities. Individuals with an impersonal orientation tend to avoid attempting to resolve conflict situations and are unlikely to strive to satisfy their own needs, instead entrusting decision-making to others, as seen in the impaired autonomy schema.

Furthermore, the medium-strength correlation between the disconnection & Rejection schema and the impersonal type suggests shared characteristics between these variables, such as distrust in one's

abilities, uncertainty regarding environmental goals, and a lack of motivation to seek external validation.

The two variables, impaired autonomy, and Disconnection & Rejection account for 25% of the variance in impersonal causal orientation ( $F(2, 195) = 33.02, p < .001; R^2 = .253$ ). This finding indicates that the extent to which impaired autonomy and disconnection/rejection schemas manifest may exacerbate the tendency toward an impersonal orientation. When these two schemas interact, the expression of impersonal orientation intensifies, thereby increasing the risk of passivity in relationships and reducing motivation to advocate for one's needs.

Controlled causal orientation demonstrated two moderate correlations: with impaired limits ( $r = .38, n$

$= 206, p = .000$ ) and with other-directedness ( $r = .324, n = 203, p = .000$ ). A multiple regression analysis was conducted using controlling orientation as the dependent variable, with impaired limits and other-directedness as independent variables. A statistically significant result was obtained ( $F(2, 200) = 21.014, p = .000$ ), with the model explaining approximately 17% of the variance in controlling orientation ( $R^2 = .174$ ). This suggests a relatively weak predictive value.

Among the independent variables, impaired limits had a stronger influence on the model ( $\beta = .294, p =$

$.000$ ) compared to other-directedness ( $\beta = .191, p = .009$ ). These two variables account for the 17% predictive value of controlling orientation. Although this indicates that other factors play a significant role in predicting controlling orientation, the results still provide insight. The more substantial effect of the impaired limits schema suggests a defensive response that aligns behavior with internal standards. Individuals with a controlling orientation appear motivated to maintain a flawless self-image, viewing relationships as opportunities to affirm their worth. This often leads to seeking constant reinforcement from a partner and responding with aggression to disagreements, hindering the development of a realistic sense of self-worth.

Interestingly, an unexpected association emerged between autonomous orientation and both impaired limits ( $r = .38, n = 206, p = .000$ ) and other-directedness ( $r = .46, n = 204, p = .000$ ), with the latter showing a stronger relationship. Other-directedness is characterized by high standards for oneself and others, along with self-sacrificing behaviors, while impaired limits are linked to a need for approval. The connection between autonomy and these variables may be attributable either to

social desirability bias in the autonomy measure or to a self-imposed standard of making "correct" decisions within relationships.

Regarding the variable of normative beliefs toward aggression, the only statistically significant correlation was the autonomous type of causal orientation. A higher score on the aggression acceptance scale indicates lower tolerance for aggression ( $r = .241$ ,  $n = 189$ ,  $p = .001$ ), suggesting that individuals with an autonomous orientation are significantly less likely to endorse aggression-tolerant tendencies. This finding aligns with previous studies that identify the autonomous type as a protective factor against violence (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Hove et al., 2010).

Given that this most adaptive form of self-determination is associated with assertive responses to conflict, it is evident that individuals with an autonomous orientation are better equipped to cope with challenges in socially acceptable ways. They rely on their internal resources and skills to express their needs openly, without resorting to aggressive behavior. Their reluctance toward aggression may stem from perceiving it as an ineffective coping mechanism. As a result, individuals with an autonomous orientation possess a broader and more effective repertoire of responses to provocative situations, allowing them to resolve conflicts without the need for aggression.

The lack of significant relationships between normative beliefs about aggression and other variables may be explained by potential issues with the questionnaire. The wording of the items and the lack of specificity in defining provocative situations may have hindered the scale's ability to differentiate between groups effectively, suggesting that the instrument may have lacked sufficient discriminant validity. Additionally, the tendency for social desirability may have influenced responses, as indicated by the extremely high internal consistency rate ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

After controlling for the variable representing the emotional significance of trauma in the aforementioned correlations, nearly all correlation coefficients exhibited statistically significant changes. However, the effect sizes were small, indicating that while the severity of trauma experienced by participants at various life stages had a measurable impact, its influence on the strength of the correlations between the variables was modest. The inclusion of this variable slightly amplified the relationship between maladaptive cognitive schemas and their correlates. Although this result supports our hypothesis regarding the effects of trauma, the observed effect sizes remain minimal despite the statistical significance.

A detailed table presenting the correlation coefficients before and after controlling for the trauma variable can be found in the appendix.

## Appendix #2

### The Impact of Childhood Trauma on Variable Correlations

|  | Correlations<br>before<br>controlling<br>childhood<br>trauma | Correlations<br>before<br>controlling<br>childhood<br>trauma | after<br>child<br>trauma |
|--|--|--|--------------------------|
| Autonomous type and normative beliefs about aggression | $r=0.242$ ,<br>$P=0.001$                                     | $N=214$ , $r=0.233$ ,<br>$P=0.002$                           | $N=214$ ;                |
| Impaired Autonomy & Performance controlled type        | $r=.213$ $n=201$ , $p=.002$                                  | $r=0.184$ ,<br>$P=0.012$                                     | $N=214$ ,                |
| Impaired autonomy & performance impersonal type        | $r=0.428$ ,<br>$P=0.000$                                     | $N=214$ , $r=.398$ ,<br>$P=0.000$                            | $N=214$ ,                |
| Impaired limits and impersonal type                    | $r=0.286$ ,<br>$P=0.000$                                     | $N=214$ , $r=0.247$ ,<br>$P=0.001$                           | $N=214$ ,                |
| Impaired limits and controlled type                    | $r=.38$ $n=206$ , $p=.000$                                   | $r=0.360$ ,<br>$P=0.000$                                     | $N=214$ ,                |
| Other-directedness and controlled                      | $r=.324$ $n=203$ , $p=.000$                                  | $r=0.310$ ,<br>$P=0.000$                                     | $N=214$ ,                |
| Other-directedness and autonomous                      | $r=.46$ $n=204$ , $p=.000$                                   | $(r=0.450$ ,<br>$P=0.000$                                    | $N=214$ ,                |

## Conclusion

The hypothesis positing that early maladaptive schemas influence beliefs about aggression was not supported, possibly due to issues with the aggression questionnaire's functionality. However, as theoretically anticipated, autonomous causal orientation emerged as a protective factor in shaping beliefs about aggression.

The hypothesis regarding the connections between maladaptive schemas and self-determination variables was confirmed. Overall, maladaptive schemas and different types of self-determination exhibited small to medium effect sizes. Specifically, impaired autonomy and disconnection/rejection were associated with



an impersonal causal orientation, while impaired limits and other-directedness were linked to a controlled type of self-determination.

Additionally, the analysis of mediating effects revealed a reduction in the influence of hypothetical experiences. Controlling the childhood trauma variable slightly altered the correlations between the study variables, yielding significant results.

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