

Examining the Relationship Between Early Maladaptive Schemas and Alexithymia with Emotional Divorce Among Married Female Students

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Article

How to cite this article:

Poursheykhian, S., Alizadeh Darbandi, H., & Arian, R. (2024). Examining the Relationship Between Early Maladaptive Schemas and Alexithymia with Emotional Divorce Among Married Female Students. *Applied Family Therapy Journal*, 5(4), 228-234.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.5.4.26>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to investigate the relationship between early maladaptive schemas (EMS), alexithymia, and emotional divorce among married female students, focusing on their predictive roles in marital detachment.

Methods: A correlational design was employed with 240 married female students recruited via convenience sampling from Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon Branch (2023–2024 academic year). Participants completed validated self-report measures: the Young Schema Questionnaire-Short Form (YSQ-SF; Young, 1995) assessing EMS across five domains (e.g., Impaired Limits, Other-Directedness), the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20; Bagby et al., 1994) measuring alexithymia subscales (Difficulty Identifying Feelings, Difficulty Describing Feelings, Externally Oriented Thinking), and the Gottman Emotional Divorce Questionnaire (GEDQ; Gottman, 1997). Data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation and stepwise regression via SPSS-26, with significance set at $p^* < .01$.

Findings: Significant correlations emerged between EMS domains, alexithymia, and emotional divorce ($r^* = 0.18-0.53$, $p^* < .01$). Stepwise regression revealed Impaired Limits as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.39$, $p^* < .01$), explaining 15% of variance, followed by incremental contributions from Difficulty Identifying Feelings ($\Delta R^2 = 3\%$, $\beta = 0.23$), Other-Directedness ($\Delta R^2 = 1\%$, $\beta = 0.13$), Externally Oriented Thinking ($\Delta R^2 = 2\%$, $\beta = 0.18$), and Impaired Autonomy ($\Delta R^2 = 2\%$, $\beta = -0.22$), cumulatively accounting for 23% of variance ($F = 15.16$, $p^* < .01$). Negative β for Impaired Autonomy suggested suppression effects.

Conclusion: EMS and alexithymia significantly predict emotional divorce, with Impaired Limits and emotion-regulation deficits being central drivers. Findings underscore the need for schema-focused interventions (e.g., schema therapy) and emotion-regulation training in marital counseling to mitigate detachment. Future research should explore dyadic interactions and cultural moderators to refine predictive models.

Keywords: Early maladaptive schemas, alexithymia, emotional divorce, married female students

1. Introduction

The formation of a family begins with marriage, and the marital relationship—one of the most intimate interpersonal bonds—is considered the core of the family system. It plays a crucial role in strengthening the family and enhancing marital quality of life (Jardine et al., 2022). Marital life is influenced by numerous factors, some of which may drive couples toward conflict, psychological detachment, emotional burnout, and even divorce (Lovis-Schmidt et al., 2024). One of the contemporary social challenges in marital relationships is the emergence of a modern phenomenon termed emotional divorce. Emotional divorce involves hidden and subtle dimensions that require extensive and precise study to understand. Due to cultural, familial, and psychosocial consequences, some individuals reject formal divorce despite severe marital issues, enduring years of cold, emotionally and physically draining coexistence. In such cases, emotional divorce occurs (Jalalvand et al., 2021).

Emotional divorce is a form of family dysfunction where, despite cohabitation under the same roof, spouses lack love, companionship, and friendship (Jarwan & Al-frehat, 2020). Arknapp, a theorist of emotional divorce, provided a profound analysis of the stages of relationship initiation, testing, and dissolution, along with related communication processes. He identified ten stages in relational dynamics: five stages of bonding and five stages of separation. The separation stages include Differentiation, Circumscribing, Stagnation, Avoidance, and Termination (Kalunta-Crumpton, 2017). Emotional divorce poses a serious threat to marital and family life, leading to adverse psychological, physical, social, and economic consequences (Amir Khosravi et al., 2020). Thus, it necessitates greater attention, with a focus on identifying contributing factors to enable prevention.

One critical individual and cognitive factor in marital life and emotional divorce is schemas. Early maladaptive schemas (EMS) are pervasive patterns of memories, emotions, cognitions, and bodily sensations about oneself and relationships, developed during childhood or adolescence. These schemas are highly dysfunctional, persist throughout life, and form the foundation of cognitive structures (Tariq et al., 2021; Young, 1998). EMS remain stable over time, organizing an individual's experiences and information processing (Munuera et al., 2020). They bias interpretations of events, manifesting in psychopathology as interpersonal misunderstandings, distorted attitudes, false assumptions, and unrealistic expectations (Kover et al.,

2024). EMS are categorized into five domains based on unmet emotional needs: Disconnection and Rejection, Impaired Autonomy, Other-Directedness, Overvigilance and Inhibition, and Impaired Limits (Laleh Zadeh et al., 2015; Talebi Zadeh et al., 2023).

In marital contexts, EMS consist of beliefs spouses hold about themselves, their relationships, and how to maintain functional dynamics. These schemas, often inherited from one's family of origin, perpetuate through behaviors that reinforce them. Clashes between partners' schemas can lead to marital conflicts and emotional distance if unresolved (Flink et al., 2017). Studies (Jalalvand et al., 2021; Samalpour Baba Ahmadi et al., 2021; Talebi Zadeh et al., 2023) indicate that EMS contribute to marital discord and emotional divorce.

Another factor influencing emotional divorce is emotion regulation skills. Deficits in this area, such as alexithymia, may predispose individuals to emotional divorce. Alexithymia, a cognitive-emotional phenomenon, involves impaired processing of emotional information due to automatic inhibition of affective experiences. Researchers attribute its etiology to limbic system dysfunction, abnormal cerebral lateralization, or interhemispheric communication deficits (Al-shahrani & Hammad, 2023). It is characterized by marked difficulties in identifying and describing emotions (Kinnaird et al., 2019). Alexithymia is considered a risk factor for psychological disorders, as somatic manifestations of un verbalized emotions create stress, impair emotion regulation, and hinder adaptive functioning. Studies (Al-shahrani & Hammad, 2023; Amir Khosravi et al., 2020) confirm its association with emotional divorce.

Given the hidden yet detrimental nature of emotional divorce and its impact on marital and family well-being, further research is imperative to identify contributing factors and design preventive educational and intervention programs. Since individual factors significantly influence this phenomenon, the current study focuses on intrapersonal variables, seeking to answer: Is there a relationship between alexithymia and early maladaptive schemas with emotional divorce among married female students?

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a descriptive-correlational design. The statistical population consisted of all married female students at Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon Branch, during the 2023–2024 academic year. A sample size

of 250 was estimated, and participants were selected via convenience sampling. After excluding incomplete or invalid questionnaires, data from 240 participants were analyzed.

2.2. Measure

2.2.1. Emotional Divorce

This scale, developed by John Gottman (1997), comprises 24 closed-ended yes/no items. Scores range from 0 to 24, with higher scores indicating greater emotional divorce. Mousavi et al. (2015) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.93 for the total scale, confirming high reliability. Factor loadings for all items ranged from 0.49 to 0.80, indicating acceptable construct validity. Face validity was established through evaluations by seven faculty members at Alzahra University's Women's Research Institute (Mousavi & Rahimi Nejad, 2015).

2.2.2. Early Maladaptive Schemas

This 75-item questionnaire assesses 15 early maladaptive schemas (EMS) based on findings by Schmidt et al. (1995). Originally developed by Young and Brown (1994) with 205 items, the short form was created in 1998. Items are scored on a 6-point Likert scale, with five items per schema. Welburn et al. (2002) reported strong internal consistency for all 15 subscales ($\alpha = 0.76\text{--}0.93$) and test-retest reliability of 0.64. In Iran, Cronbach's alpha values were 0.97 for females and 0.98 for males, with further studies confirming its validity (Laleh Zadeh et al., 2015).

2.2.3. Alexithymia

This 20-item self-report tool measures three dimensions: Difficulty Identifying Feelings (7 items), Difficulty

Describing Feelings (5 items), and Externally Oriented Thinking (8 items). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree). Scores ≥ 60 indicate high alexithymia, while scores ≤ 52 reflect low levels. In Iranian samples, internal consistency (Cronbach's α) was 0.79 for the total scale and 0.75, 0.71, and 0.66 for subscales, respectively. Test-retest reliability in clinical samples was 0.77 (total), 0.73, 0.69, and 0.65 (Besharat, 2009).

2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation coefficient and stepwise regression analysis via SPSS-26 software.

3. Findings and Results

Descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented in Table 1. Emotional divorce scores averaged 65.32 (SD = 14.25), reflecting moderate levels of marital detachment. Among early maladaptive schemas, Impaired Limits had the highest mean ($M = 62.11$, $SD = 11.89$), followed by Overvigilance ($M = 60.22$, $SD = 13.01$), suggesting these domains were prominent in the sample. Alexithymia subscales revealed moderate deficits, with Difficulty Identifying Feelings ($M = 24.56$, $SD = 5.12$) scoring higher than Difficulty Describing Feelings ($M = 20.45$, $SD = 4.89$) and Externally Oriented Thinking ($M = 18.67$, $SD = 3.45$). These baseline metrics align with theoretical expectations for the instruments' scoring ranges and provide context for subsequent correlational and regression analyses.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 240)

Variable	Mean (SD)
Emotional Divorce	65.32 (14.25)
Disconnection/Rejection	58.76 (12.34)
Impaired Limits	62.11 (11.89)
Other-Directedness	55.43 (10.56)
Overvigilance	60.22 (13.01)
Impaired Autonomy	54.89 (9.87)
Difficulty Identifying Feelings	24.56 (5.12)
Difficulty Describing Feelings	20.45 (4.89)
Externally Oriented Thinking	18.67 (3.45)

As shown in Table 2, the correlation coefficients between early maladaptive schemas, alexithymia, and emotional

divorce among married female students were statistically significant ($p < .01$).

Table 2

Correlation Matrix of Early Maladaptive Schemas, Alexithymia, and Emotional Divorce

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Emotional Divorce	1	0.29**	0.38**	0.24**	0.20**	0.28**	0.36**	-0.15*	0.18**
2. Disconnection/Rejection		1	0.56**	0.55**	0.28**	0.46**	0.27**	0.21**	0.48**
3. Impaired Limits			1	0.27**	0.25**	0.51**	0.53**	0.36**	0.45**
4. Other-Directedness				1	0.60**	0.07	0.23**	0.26**	0.47**
5. Overvigilance					1	0.17**	0.40**	0.25**	0.46**
6. Impaired Autonomy						1	0.46**	0.41**	0.58**
7. Difficulty Identifying Feelings							1	0.51**	0.53**
8. Difficulty Describing Feelings								1	0.56**
9. Externally Oriented Thinking									1

**p < .01, *p < .05

The stepwise regression results (Table 3) indicate that Impaired Limits was the strongest predictor, explaining 15% of the variance in emotional divorce. Adding Difficulty Identifying Feelings increased the variance explained to 18% ($\Delta R^2 = 3\%$), followed by Other-Directedness ($\Delta R^2 =$

1%), Externally Oriented Thinking ($\Delta R^2 = 2\%$), and Impaired Autonomy ($\Delta R^2 = 2\%$). Collectively, these variables accounted for 23% of the variance in emotional divorce.

Table 3

Summary of Stepwise Regression Analysis for Early Maladaptive Schemas and Alexithymia Predicting Emotional Divorce

Predictor Variables	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Standard Error
Impaired Limits	0.39	0.15	0.15	15.51
Difficulty Identifying Feelings	0.43	0.19	0.18	15.19
Other-Directedness	0.45	0.20	0.20	15.07
Externally Oriented Thinking	0.47	0.22	0.21	14.92
Impaired Autonomy	0.50	0.25	0.23	14.73

As shown in Table 4, the F-values for all five steps were statistically significant ($p < .01$), confirming that the regression model significantly predicts emotional divorce.

Table 4

ANOVA Results for Stepwise Regression Model Significance

Step	Source	SS	df	MS	F	*p*
1	Impaired Limits	9993.08	1	9993.08	41.58	< .01
	Residual	57194.32	238	240.32		
2	Difficulty Identifying Feelings	12515.58	2	6257.79	27.13	< .01
	Residual	54671.82	237	230.68		
3	Other-Directedness	13621.92	3	4540.64	20.01	< .01
	Residual	53565.48	236	226.97		
4	Externally Oriented Thinking	14848.93	4	3712.23	16.67	< .01
	Residual	52338.47	235	222.72		
5	Impaired Autonomy	16435.32	5	3287.06	15.16	< .01
	Residual	50752.08	234	216.89		

According to Table 5, the final regression equation for predicting emotional divorce is:

$$\text{Emotional Divorce} = 102.19 + 0.33(\text{Impaired Limits}) + 0.52(\text{Difficulty Identifying Feelings}) + 0.70(\text{Other-Directedness}) + 0.61(\text{Externally Oriented Thinking}) - 0.46(\text{Impaired Autonomy})$$

All predictors significantly contributed to the model ($*p < .01$):

- In Model 1, Impaired Limits ($\beta = 0.386$, $*p < .01$) directly predicted emotional divorce, accounting for 0.67 units of change.

- In Model 2, Impaired Limits ($\beta = 0.262$) and Difficulty Identifying Feelings ($\beta = 0.230$) collectively explained 18% of the variance.
- In Model 3, Other-Directedness ($\beta = 0.133$) added incremental predictive power.
- In Model 4, Externally Oriented Thinking ($\beta = 0.180$) contributed significantly.
- In Model 5, Impaired Autonomy ($\beta = -0.218$) emerged as a negative predictor, finalizing the model with 23% explained variance.

Table 5

Stepwise Regression Coefficients for Predicting Emotional Divorce

Model	Predictor	*b*	SE	β	*t*	*p*
1	Constant	92.21	3.14	-	29.26	< .01
	Impaired Limits	0.67	0.10	0.386	6.45	< .01
2	Constant	96.16	3.31	-	29.05	< .01
	Impaired Limits	0.46	0.12	0.262	3.76	< .01
	Difficulty Identifying Feelings	0.45	0.14	0.230	3.30	< .01
3	Constant	100.54	3.83	-	26.21	< .01
	Impaired Limits	0.41	0.12	0.233	3.33	< .01
	Difficulty Identifying Feelings	0.42	0.14	0.213	3.07	< .01
	Other-Directedness	0.37	0.17	0.133	2.21	< .01
4	Constant	99.77	3.81	-	26.17	< .01
	Impaired Limits	0.45	0.12	0.262	3.72	< .01
	Difficulty Identifying Feelings	0.55	0.15	0.281	3.77	< .01
	Other-Directedness	0.53	0.18	0.196	2.99	< .01
	Externally Oriented Thinking	0.38	0.16	0.180	2.35	0.02
5	Constant	102.19	3.87	-	26.43	< .01
	Impaired Limits	0.33	0.13	0.294	2.62	< .01
	Difficulty Identifying Feelings	0.52	0.14	0.266	3.63	< .01
	Other-Directedness	0.70	0.19	0.258	3.75	< .01
	Externally Oriented Thinking	0.61	0.18	0.242	3.41	< .01
	Impaired Autonomy	0.46	0.17	-0.218	2.71	< .01

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results revealed a significant relationship between early maladaptive schemas (EMS) and alexithymia with emotional divorce among married female students. Both EMS and alexithymia were found to predict emotional divorce, with Impaired Limits emerging as the strongest predictor, explaining 15% of the variance in emotional divorce. Subsequent predictors included Difficulty Identifying Feelings, Other-Directedness, Externally Oriented Thinking, and Impaired Autonomy, which directly contributed to the prediction of emotional divorce. Collectively, these variables accounted for 23% of the variance in emotional divorce.

To explain these findings, early maladaptive schemas generate cognitive biases in interpreting events, manifesting

as misunderstandings, distorted attitudes, false assumptions, and unrealistic goals or expectations in spouses. These biases influence subsequent perceptions and evaluations. Schemas persist throughout life, and individuals actively work to maintain them, which impacts the quality of interpersonal relationships, particularly with romantic partners (Jalalvand et al., 2021). Couples influenced by EMS exhibit behaviors that disrupt shared understanding of marital concepts, leading to relational turmoil, unrealistic expectations, emotional dysregulation, unresolved family conflicts, and life challenges—outcomes rooted in lifelong schemas. Thus, the more maladaptive an individual's schemas, the greater the likelihood of emotional distance and eventual emotional divorce due to reduced marital understanding, heightened interpersonal conflicts, and emotional detachment.

Individuals with schemas in the Impaired Limits domain struggle with adherence to principles, rules, or boundaries. They may fail to respect others' rights, cooperate, commit, or pursue long-term goals. Such individuals often display entitlement, selfishness, irresponsibility, or narcissism, prioritizing their own interests. In decision-making, they prioritize personal gain over their spouse's rights, needs, or desires, eroding intimacy, empathy, and respect, thereby increasing emotional distance (Flink et al., 2017; Kover et al., 2024).

For those with schemas in the Other-Directedness domain, Young et al. (2003) posit that these individuals prioritize others' needs over their own to gain approval, maintain emotional connections, or avoid retaliation. In childhood, they were often restricted from following natural inclinations, leading to external locus of control and compliance with others' demands in adulthood. Families of such individuals typically prioritized parental emotional or social status needs over the child's unique needs, diminishing emotional bonding and exacerbating marital detachment (Young et al., 2003).

Regarding schemas in the Impaired Autonomy domain, individuals struggle with expectations of independence, survival, or task performance. Young et al. (2003) note that such individuals may develop dependency schemas in romantic relationships, selecting overly supportive partners to reinforce their self-view as dependent (Young et al., 2003). Some may overcompensate through pseudo-independence, avoiding intimacy and inadvertently fostering emotional distance (Laleh Zadeh et al., 2015).

Beyond cognitive schemas, emotional deficits in couples significantly affect marital dynamics. Just as schemas distort thoughts and perpetuate cognitive errors, unregulated emotions impair behavior and cognition. Alexithymia, defined as a cognitive-emotional phenomenon involving impaired emotional processing due to automatic inhibition of affective information (Al-shahrani & Hammad, 2023), limits individuals' ability to express, identify, or describe emotions. Spouses, who often rely on each other for emotional support, require mutual emotional awareness and responsiveness. Alexithymic individuals, lacking emotional self-awareness and empathy, exhibit cold, rigid behaviors, fail to meet their partner's emotional needs, and gradually erode marital intimacy, paving the way for emotional divorce.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

The study has several limitations, including reliance on convenience sampling from a single university (Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon Branch), which restricts the generalizability of findings to broader populations. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences, as temporal relationships between variables cannot be established. Additionally, self-report measures (e.g., Young's Schema Questionnaire, Toronto Alexithymia Scale) may introduce response biases such as social desirability or recall inaccuracies. The focus on married female students excludes male perspectives and other demographic groups (e.g., non-students, older couples), limiting the understanding of gender-specific dynamics. Finally, cultural and contextual factors influencing emotional divorce were not systematically examined, potentially overlooking unique sociocultural drivers in non-Western settings.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to explore causal pathways between early maladaptive schemas, alexithymia, and emotional divorce. Diversifying samples across genders, age groups, and cultural contexts would enhance generalizability. Integrating mixed-methods approaches (e.g., qualitative interviews) could provide deeper insights into interpersonal and cultural mechanisms. Researchers should also investigate moderators (e.g., coping strategies, social support) and mediators (e.g., communication patterns) to refine theoretical models. Clinically, interventions such as schema therapy and emotion regulation training could be tailored for couples at risk of emotional divorce. Universities and community programs should prioritize workshops on emotional literacy and relational skills to mitigate schema-driven conflicts. Lastly, validating findings in clinical populations (e.g., couples in therapy) would strengthen practical applications.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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