

## The Theoretical Framework and Application on the Relationships between Family Functioning, Alexithymia and Emotional Intelligence among Early Adolescents

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**Abstract:** With respect to the relationship between family functioning, alexithymia, and early adolescent's emotional intelligence construct is still being developed with empirical support. Hence, our the pervious researches showed that how family functioning, alexithymia and several family's characters could effect on early adolescent's emotional intelligence. This study defines and discusses the theoretical framework in terms of the relationships between family functioning, alexithymia and several families' factors that influence on early adolescent's emotional intelligence, specifically.

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### 1. Introduction

As emotional intelligence is acquisitive and of social origin (Goleman 1995, Mayer and Salovey 1990), parents and children, in their interactions, expose their emotions expression way to one another consciously or unconsciously. The family has the highest effect on the individuals and it can mould their behaviors at any moment. A behavior which is created in relation to other family members is not limited to a normal agreeable behavior. The family can form abnormal behaviors, too (Sanaei, 2000). Considering, alexithymia is not classified as a mental disorder in the DSM-IV. It refers to the difficulty to identify, describe feelings to other people and it is a dimensional personality characteristic that varies in severity from person to person thus, family as a first circumstance can create this kind of characters. In addition, the treatment by parents to their children and how they react to their interests and activities, as well as children treatment to one another, emotion and information exchange among them, emotional protection to one another, and the relationships of the family members' with outsiders may also influence the children's emotional intelligence (Naghavi, 2010).

The family functioning construct is a relatively new concept with little empirical research, particularly related to the link between seven specific sub-components of the family function (dysfunction) and their emotional intelligence's early adolescent.

There has been a growing interest in the family functioning and emotional functioning of early adolescence (Goodyer, & Herbert, 1998; Walsh, 1993, Patterson, 2002, Ozbaci , 2006) and the factors that influence it (Goleman 1996, Mayer and Salovey, 1990;

Carlson, 1999; Palmer et al., 2007; Bar-On, 1997; Martinez-Pons, 1997; Schutte's, 1998) in order to develop more integrated theories of development (McMaster's, 1995; Epstein, Bishop, & Levin, 1960; Goleman, 1995). There are many assumptions about family functioning and emotional intelligence. Ozbaci (2006) has assessed the relationship between and family environment and emotional intelligence EQ. The sample of the study was selected as 274 parents who live in Istanbul including 152 female, 122 male. Data were collected by EQ-NED and "Family Environment Scale" to determine family characteristics and the EQ. The results of the study indicate that there was a relationship between family cooperation and EQ.

A conceptually similar emotional intelligence construct is alexithymia. A comparison of the definitions of emotional intelligence and alexithymia suggests that the two constructs are closely related (Parker *et al.*, 2001). Meanwhile, the emotional intelligence construct emerged from an integration of an array of research findings on how people appraise, communicate and use emotion (Salovey & Mayer, 1989, 1990). Although psychological systems have negatively looked into emotions, the attention given to emotions and feelings can be regarded as the core and basis of psychology and one can therefore look for mental disturbances roots in emotional perturbations like fear, anxiety, depression and alexithymia (Naghavi et al., 2010). Moreover, there is empirical evidence indicating that alexithymia is associated with the difficulties in discriminating among different emotional states (Bagby *et al.*, 1993). In research studies by Salovey and Mayer (1989, 1990), the overlapping emotional intelligence and alexithymia constructs were

acknowledges, and the researchers made attempts to empirically evaluate the relationships between the two constructs. One possible explanation for this is that these investigators have yet to introduce a standardized method for assessing emotional intelligence.

It is understood from the previous studies that emotional intelligence is associated with some factors, such as family function and some personality characters like alexithymia. This research studied the relation between family functioning and emotional intelligence so as to develop and expand the concept of emotional intelligence in the family. In other words, the importance of family functioning on alexithymia and emotional intelligence has been found to be very significant. It is expected that this research would identify different family functioning dimensions have influences on early adolescents' emotional intelligence.

## 2. Difications of Family functioning, Alexithymia and Emotional intelligence

The family functioning refers to a set of tasks, roles, and expectations members of a family have for one another (Najarian, 1995). Patterson (1995) has shown that family functioning refers to performing the functions of the family and the pattern of relationships connecting members of a family system. Note that there are different patterns of relationships, such as patterns for showing affection, for problem solving in daily tasks.

The alexithymia is considered as a personality trait that places individuals at risk of other medical and psychiatric disorders while reducing the likelihood that these individuals will respond to conventional treatments for other conditions (Haviland, Warren & Riggs, 2000). Alexithymia is not classified as a mental disorder in the DSM-IV. It is a dimensional personality trait that varies in severity from one person to another. A person's alexithymia score can be measured using questionnaires, such as the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), Rieffe's Children's Alexithymia scale (2006) and the Bermond-Vorst Alexithymia Questionnaire (BVAQ) (Vorst & Bermond, 2001) or the Observer Alexithymia Scale (OAS) (Haviland *et al.*, 2000). Based on the definition given by Taylor, Parker & Bagby (1990), in the context of this study, alexithymia is defined as:

1. Difficulty in identifying feelings and distinguishing between these feelings and the bodily sensations of emotional arousal.
2. Difficulty in describing feelings to other people.
3. Constricted imaginably processes, as evidenced by a paucity of fantasies.
4. A stimulus-bound, externally oriented cognitive style.

The emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to understand feelings in the self and others, and to use

these feelings as informational guides for thinking and action (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Bar-On (1997) defines emotional intelligence as the emotional, personal, social, and survival dimensions of intelligence, which are often more important for daily functioning than the more cognitive aspects of intelligence. Martinez-Pons (1997) stated that emotional intelligence refers to the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

Emotional intelligence is acquisitive and of social origin. Thus, the family with multi-functional aspects serves as a fundamental dimension in the development of early adolescents' emotional intelligence. According to Epstein, Bishop, and Levin (1960), family structure and its appraisal method is problem-oriented. These emphasize family functioning in three areas:

- (1) Basic tasks such as supply of foodstuff, clothes, as well as transportation and accommodation expenses
- (2) Developmental task area (i.e. how a family copes with the transition stage problems such as adolescents going out of childhood or their leaving home
- (3) Jeopardizing task area (i.e. crises may happen to the family, such as job losing, accidents, etc.) (Epstein, Baldwin, Bishop, 1983 cited in Tamplin, Goodyer & Herbert, 1998).

In a family with high functioning, members inform one another of their thoughts and feelings through interaction and communication. Communication is one of the main family functions that improve adolescents' emotional intelligence. In fact, effective communication is an important requirement of any personal relationship. In the context of this study, the researcher mentioned the role of communication in the family and the improvement of early adolescents' emotional intelligence.

The theoretical framework in this study is organized in three sections. (i)The first section includes the emotional intelligence theory. This particular section is an attempt to reveal the effects of several factors that influence emotional intelligence. (ii)The second section highlights the importance of social cognitive theory in the emotional processing of early adolescents' emotional intelligence improvement and *vas versa* can cause alexithymia. The purpose of this particular study was to examine the associations or relationships between family functioning and emotional intelligence in early adolescents' emotional intelligence and alexithymia. In addition, social cognitive can be related of the role of early family relationships or early mother-child relationships in

affecting the development and in the acquisition of self-regulatory capacities. It is needed because of the important concepts in social cognitive theory, which are interaction, reciprocal process through person, environment and behaviour. According to social cognitive theory, family as the first unit with communication functioning, can develop early adolescence's lives, and thus, social cognitive theory refers to learning by observing others, with the environment, behaviour, and cognition as all the key factors influencing the development of early adolescents. Therefore, it seems that family with dysfunctioning, according to this theory, can cover alexithymia. (iii) Finally, this section also included family functioning model, and attempted to reveal the role of family via multi functioning aspects.

### **Emotional Intelligence Theory**

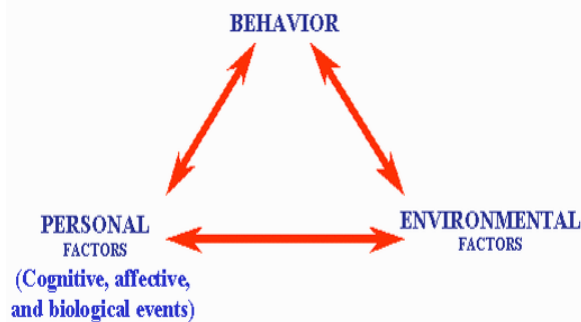
Emotional intelligence is conceptualized as comprising five primary domains, which include knowing one's emotions, recognizing emotions in others, handling relationships, and motivating oneself (Goleman, 1995). The emotional intelligence theory was introduced by Goleman (1995). These domains, as the main factors in emotional intelligence, can support this area of the current study. The framework of emotional intelligence was used to bring, in an organized whole, the five related components comprising the abilities related to the understanding, managing, and use of emotions. The first of these domains, i.e. knowing one's own emotions, involves the ability to accurately recognize, identify, and label feeling and emotions as they arise in oneself. It entails removing oneself from the experience of an emotion that is enough to develop a self-awareness of what one is feeling or one's mood. The second emotional intelligence, i.e. managing one's emotions, is built largely on self-awareness, and it involves the ability to regulate emotions so that they are experienced appropriately. Individuals who are skilful at intensity and duration of feelings such as persons are able to cope more effectively with emotionally-laden situations in their lives. Similarly, the third domain of emotional intelligence is also built on self-awareness. Synonymous with empathy, it involves the ability to read the feelings in others and to become emotionally attuned to subtle social cues. Individuals who are deficient in identifying their own emotions are also necessarily deficient in knowing what others are feeling. The fourth of emotional intelligence comprises the ability to appropriately and effectively handle interpersonal relationships, a skill more generally known as social competence. It is important to note that a core aspect of social competence involves the skill of managing emotions in others, and is contingent on having developed the ability to accurately identify

how others are feeling and the ability to exert self-control over one's own emotions. The fifth domain of emotional intelligence is unique as it emphasizes on the utilization of emotions, as opposed to the appraisal, expression, or regulation of emotions which are emphasized by the other four domains. Mayer and Salovey (1997) conceptualized this domain as comprising four independent abilities, including flexible planning, creative thinking, mood redirected attention, and motivation. They further proposed that emotionally intelligent individuals are able to adaptively utilize and modify their emotional states to solve problems more effectively and achieve goals. For the purpose of the proposed study, the fifth domain of emotional intelligence is broadly defined as "achievement orientation". In keeping with Goleman's description of this particular domain, achievement orientation is viewed as encompassing the following components: motivation, optimism, delay of gratification, and self-efficacy. In addition, a high achievement orientation was also proposed to include an internal locus control or attribution style and not controlled by outside forces. According Naghavi & Ma'rof, early adolescence whose parents consistently practice emotion coaching have better physical health and score higher academically than early adolescence whose family do not offer such guidance (2012). On the other hand, the role of families' performance in all individual's behaviours, normal and abnormal behaviours, personality, and development of his different talents is important. Family functioning of their early adolescents and how they react to their interests and activities, early adolescents' treatment to one another, emotion and information exchange among them, emotional protection for one another, and the family members' outside relations may influence the early adolescents' emotional intelligence. Whence, the alexithymia is an antonym to emotional expression, alexithymia is utilized to explain the lack of ability to express and regulate emotions (Apfel & Sifneos, 1979). In fact, as an individual difference, alexithymia overlaps conceptually with the emotional intelligence construct, which encompasses the ability to perceive and appraise one's own and others' and emotions, the ability to access and use the feelings to guide one's thinking and actions, and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth (Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

Social cognitive theory is a learning theory based on the ideas that people learn by watching what others do and that human thought processes are central to understanding personality. People learn by observing others, with the environment, behaviour, and cognition as the chief factors in influencing their development.

These three factors are not static or independent; rather, they are all reciprocal. This is the foundation of Bandura's (1986) conception of reciprocal determinism, i.e. the view that (a) personal factors in the form of cognition, affect, emotion, and biological events, (b) behaviour, and (c) environmental influences, such as parent, sibling relations in family create interactions that result in a triadic reciprocity. The reciprocal nature of the determinants of human functioning in social cognitive theory makes it possible for therapeutic and counselling efforts to be directed at personal, environmental, or behavioural factors (Pajares, 2002). Figure.1 indicates the Conceptual Model of Social Cognitive theory. More examples can be cited to clarify each witness that can change a person's way of thinking and interaction with family members. Similarly, the environment every person is raised in may influence his or her later behaviours, just as a father's or mother's mindset (also cognition) will determine the environment in which his or her children are raised (Santrock, 2008).



**Figur 1: The Conceptual Model of Social Cognitive theory** (Source: Pajares, 2002).

On the other hand, several theories have hypothesized that personal characters, whether positive or negative, stem from adaptive or maladaptive early life experiences, and are usually associated with family functioning. According to Lumley, Mader, Gramzow & Papineau (1996), trauma, excessive parent's attention to a child's bodily rather than emotional needs, and family's emotional unavailability or inconsistency have been posited as leading to disturbed effect representation and self-regulation of alexithymia. Although empirical studies have also demonstrated that a family's behaviour influences early adolescent functioning (Taylor, 2000; McElwain, Halberstadt, & Volling, 2007). These researchers found young adults' reports of diminished family expressiveness that specifically limit positive communication are related to their own affective identification and communication deficits. Based on the alexithymia's aetiology (Taylor & Taylor, 1997; Taylor, 2000) some researches demonstrating that pathological parenting it was hypothesized that early adolescent's level of alexithymia would be positively related to the levels of

general pathology in their families. Furthermore, based on the social cognitive theory's predictions of specificity in learning and the findings of Berenbaum and James (1994) of a unique relationship between the type of alexithymia deficit and specific family dysfunction, it was hypothesized that dysfunction in a family member's emotional involvement would be associated with affective alexithymia deficits, whereas a lack of rules governing family behaviour and deficient family solving ability would be related to externally oriented thinking.

However, there seems to be a contradiction for alexithymia individuals as they can be socially adaptive. The key is that they are able to anticipate and interact with others so as to form functional, but not close relationships. Their ability to understand and deal with the subtleties of intimate relationships is very poor. It appears that alexithymic individuals can predict beliefs and actions at a macroscopic social level but have difficulty at the intimate individual level. Hence, social cognitive theory is at the base of children's social understanding, and thus, in all cultures, family is the first of social unit and the centre of the individual's identity formation. Early adolescent in family environment learn to express, comprehend, understand, and regulate emotions by exchanging their emotions with parents and coevals. Some of them take control of their own and others' emotions more skilfully due to the big differences in the individual abilities and their social world. However, some children lack adequate skills to interpret emotions for their own achievement in the social world (Scharfe, 2000). Emotional intelligence enables an individual to correctly exhibit suitable amount of different emotions, such as rage, fear, love, happiness, etc., in his/her behaviour, proportional to the situation and time. In addition, it also enables them to understand others' emotions and react accordingly (Goleman, 1996; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000). In contrast, alexithymia overlay emotional intelligence in the field of emotion identification to some extent, into feelings expression. In other words, an alexithymia adolescent cannot express his/her emotions orally due to his/her inability to identify these feelings, whereas preliminary emotional abilities have specific importance because skilfulness in appraisal and quick precise expression of emotions bring about suitable compatibility in relation to the environment and others (Taylor & Bagby, 2000). As a result, as emotional intelligence is acquisitive and of social origin (Goleman, 1996; Mayer & Salovey, 1990), parents and children, in their interactions, expose the expression of their emotions to one another consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, regarding to this reciprocal process, the theory of social cognitive can support relationships between family functioning, alexithymia and emotional intelligence. Consistent with



the social cognitive perspective, prior studies have demonstrated that the development and interaction among each domain have significant relationships with child psychological development (e.g., emotional intelligence, problem behaviours, alexithymia). In addition, Naghavi (2011), demonstrated that early adolescents develop specific alexithymia characteristics as a result of family dysfunction in emotional or cognitive domains in her study. These findings are well agreed with theories of the social cognitive theory. Due to according social cognitive theory early adolescents learn to express, understand, and regulate their emotions in interactions with their family, siblings. Family is strong shapers to early adolescent's behavior (Stover, 2003). Furthermore, parental emotion affect on early adolescent's emotion and social behaviors by its emotional regulation.

### **McMaster's Model of Family Functioning Appraisal**

This model was introduced by Epstein, Bishop, and Levin in the early 60's during a prolonged study. It concentrates on family structure and its appraisal method is problem-oriented. This model emphasizes family functioning in three different areas, namely: Basic tasks such as supply of foodstuff, clothes, transportation and accommodation expenses. Developmental task area: how a family copes with the transition stage problems, such as adolescents' going out of childhood or their leaving home. Jeopardizing task area: crises may happen to the family, such as losing jobs, accidents, etc. (Epstein, Baldwin, Bishop, 1983 cited in Goodyer, & Herbert, 1998).

There are six dimensions of family functions assessment in the Family appraisal model. These functions include: (1) problem solving; (2) communication; (3) roles, (4) affective responsiveness; (5) affective involvement; and (6) behavioural control.

**Problem-solving:** This dimension deals with the family's ability to solve problems to the extent that it becomes efficient.

**Communication:** This dimension deals with the family's ability to communicate information. The main function is communication, which in this research was more emphasized for its efficacy on early adolescents' emotional intelligence improvement.

**Roles:** This structure describes family efficiency based on tasks allocation to members and their accomplishing these tasks.

**Affective Responsiveness:** This refers to family members' ability in making suitable responses to positive and negative emotional situations.

**Affective Involvement:** A reaction each member shows to others' interests and attention. In fact, this describes family members' interests and views toward one another.

**Behaviour Control:** This dimension is associated with the rules based on which the family passes training. It includes the amount of influence members leave on one another.

The McMaster Model emphasizes speech communication. Four kinds of communication are specified in this model, namely; (1) clear and explicit, (2) explicit, (3) clear and inexplicit, and (4) masked and incorrect. The most effective form of communication is the clear and explicit kind, whereas the most ineffective one is the masked incorrect kind because unclear and incorrect messages confuse addressees due to their ambiguity, equivocalness, and conflict, clear and inexplicit, masked and incorrect. It is preferred that messages be sent directly by the messenger, not via a medium. In such conditions, misunderstanding or even misuse by the messenger is likely. In a family with high functioning, members inform one another of their thoughts and feelings in delicate ways. They express their interests and concerns and talk about important issues. They can talk with other members about themselves and their life; they know that they are listened to and understood. Thus, effective communication is an important requirement for intimate relations. Communicative models in a family have effects on the models which will be applied by children in their future families. Communication is not limited to words; it includes listening, silence, looks exchange, facial state, poses, touching, body state, and other non-vocal symbols and codes used to send and receive meanings (Nowruzi, 1998).

Stern, Yuen & He (2004), believe that effective family communication play a critical role in maintaining positive, healthy relationship, problem solving and managing stress. According this point of view, communication in family is as a key factor to improve the emotional intelligence of early adolescents. Communication is one of the family functions that incorporate the interaction between the parents and children. Families that use clear and positive communication in their interaction with each other are always consistent in what is said and what is done. Furthermore, family members will discuss personal fears, stresses, criticisms, complaints, and other feelings with each other rather than censoring such topics from conversation. Such families moreover have the adults clarifying ambiguous situations to children, explaining their own expectations or feelings in terms that the children can recognize, and encouraging children to explain their own fears and feelings and to have a voice in family decision making and problem solving (Conger & Conger, 2002). These types of family communication have shown to promote better emotional regulation, coping skills and cognitive ability (Cox & Davis, 1999; Conger & Conger, 2002;

Wagner, Cohen, Brooks, 1996). In addition, family functioning research suggests that family environment has a significant influence on developing empathy and identification of emotions (Saarni, 1999, Honig, 1981). Baumrind (1993) and Harris (1995) believe that the importance of socialization and family functioning on children's subsequent emotional expression as they mature. Contrary to the alexithymia is an antonym to emotional expression. Alexithymia is used to describe the inability to express and regulate emotions (Apfel & Sifneos, 1979).

#### 4. Conclusion

Regarding in relation to the above discussion, the related literature has indicated that early adolescents' emotional intelligence is influenced by some factors such as the different tasks, communications, roles and aspects of family and some personal characters. Hence, this study attempted to, firstly describe these factors, and secondly examine the relationship between these factors and early adolescents emotional intelligence so as to understand some aspects of emotional intelligence related to alexithymia, family functioning and their early adolescents to provide the existing evidence and criteria for future programmes.

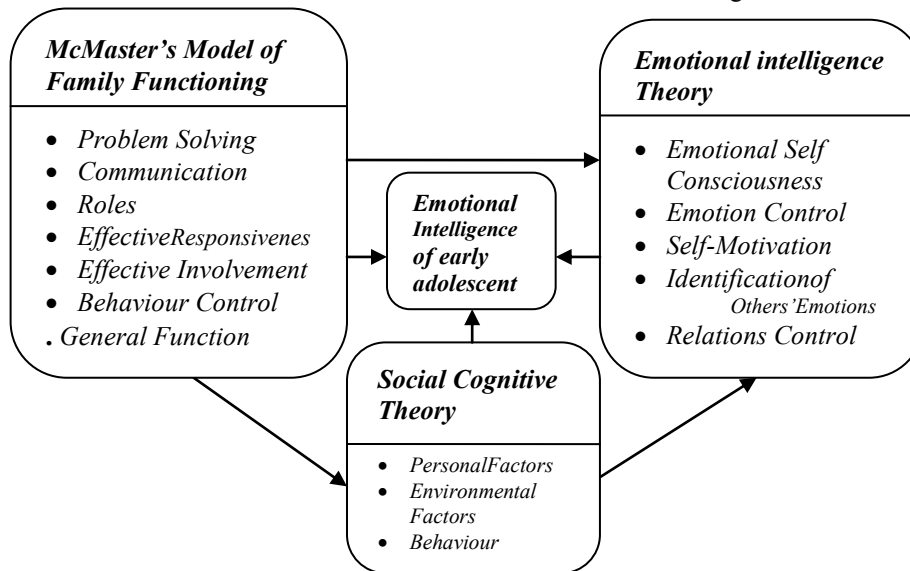


Figure 2: A Diagram of the Theoretical Framework

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