

## A Conceptual Framework of the Relationships between Family Functioning, Alexithymia and Emotional Intelligence among Early Adolescents in Tehran-Iran

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**Abstract:** Emotional intelligence structure is a concept with little empirical research, particularly in relation to the link between family circumstance and personality characters and with respect to gender, number of sibling, family income, and family educational status of early adolescents. In the present study, the researchers attempted to show that regarding to the definition and foundation of a conceptual framework how would design a conceptual framework according the relationships between family functioning, alexithymia and emotional intelligence variables, among Iranian early adolescents. Due to the lack of research on family functioning, alexithymia and their influences on early adolescents' emotional intelligence in Iran, there is much need for research that explores those factors of influence on early adolescent's emotional intelligence, specifically.

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### 1. Introduction

Emotional intelligence is a set of abilities that include conception, emotion appraisal and expression, emotion management and regulation, as well as emotion utilization for affective involvement (Goleman 1995); these abilities had been the focus in this research. 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.

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 acknowledged, 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. Furthermore, with respect to the current context of Iran, the society is changing from a traditional to a modern society. In this situation, family are facing different and more challenging roles and responsibilities compared to those were in the past. With their increased level of knowledge and growing mobility, they have become more participative in parenting, which could lead them to have more sensitivity to developing their children's emotional, personality, social, and so on. However, they may lack knowledge of how to go about it. This has created a gap in the body of knowledge, for this and many other reasons stated earlier on, the current study investigated on the relationship between family functioning, alexithymia and emotional intelligence of early adolescents.

## **2. Relationship between Family Functioning and Emotional intelligence**

There has been a growing interest in the issues of family functioning and emotional intelligence of early adolescents (Tamplin, Goodyer & Herbert, 1998; Gottman, 1997; Walsh, 1993, Patterson, 1995; Ozbaci, 2006; Manuel, 2002; Yamada, 2004) and the factors influencing them (Goleman, 1996; Mayer & Salovey, 1990; Carson & Parke, 1996; Palmer *et al.*, 2007; Brudy & Hall, 2000; BarOn, 1997; Martinez-Pons, 1997; Schutte, 1998) to develop more integrated theories of development (McMaster, 1995; Epstein, Bishop, & Levin, 1960; Goleman, 1995; Tamplin *et al.*, 2002). In fact, emotional intelligence (EI) has recently attracted a lot of interest in research on family functioning. Several new findings recently obtained have shown that parents with emotional intelligence are helpful. That is how family members deal with each other's feelings, and apart from possessing a basic role in their direct behaviours towards their children, they also model such interactions to them. As indicated earlier on, early adolescents pay attention to the emotional interactions of the family. Gottman (1997) pointed out that good parenting requires not only intellect but also involves emotion. In the last decade or so, science has discovered a tremendous amount of roles emotions play on our lives. Meanwhile, researchers have found that more than IQ, emotional awareness and the ability to handle feelings can determine success and happiness in all lifestyles, including family relationships. For parents, this quality of emotional intelligence (as many now call it) means being aware of early adolescence's feelings and also being able to empathize, soothe, and guide them. For

early adolescents who learn most lessons about emotions from their family, this includes the ability to control impulses, delay gratification, motivate them, read other people's social cues, and cope with life's difficulties. In addition, early adolescents, whose parents consistently practice emotion coaching, have better physical health and score higher academically than those whose family do not offer such guidance.

According to Yamada (2004), children of depressed family are at increased risk of emotional difficulties and behavioural problems. Nonetheless, little is known about the effects of maternal depression on early adolescence's emotional intelligence. The purpose of this research was to examine several broad dimensions of emotional intelligence in children aged 7 to 8 years old whose mothers were with or without any background of depression. The preliminary findings indicated that gender differences in children's emotional intelligence, with an advantage for girls and an association between infant temperament and children's abilities of emotional intelligence at 7 year old. According to Naghavi & Ma'rof (2012), today in the Iran, Iranian families have started to take on roles vastly different from family of previous generations. Moreover, family takes on ever more responsibility for raising their early adolescents than in the generations that preceded them. As a result, they discovered that introverted children with high level of emotional intelligence were influenced more by the family environment as compared to extroverted children with low emotional intelligence. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to determine and describe the correlations between family functioning and emotional intelligence in the context of Iran.

## **3. Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Alexithymia**

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). The salient features of the alexithymia construct include the difficulties in identifying and describing subjective feelings, a limited imaginative capacity, and an externally oriented style of thinking (Taylor *et al.*, 1991, 1997). Moreover, there is empirical evidence indicating that alexithymia is associated with the difficulties in discriminating among different emotional states (Bagby *et al.*, 1993), and with a limited ability to think about and use

emotions to cope with stressful situations (Scheaffer, Mendenhall & Ott, 1990; Parker *et al.*, 1998). In research studies by Salovey and Mayer (1989, 1990), the overlapping emotional intelligence and alexithymia constructs were acknowledged, 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. In addition, the definition of the constructs was recently operationalized by Schutte *et al.* (1998) who had developed and validated a 33-item self-report scale. In a mixed, but rather small, university student and community sample (n=25), this scale correlated strongly and negatively ( $r=-0.65$ ) with the 26-item Toronto Alexithymia Scale.

#### 4. Relationship between Family Functioning and Alexithymia

The record of studies on the relationship between family functioning and alexithymia was that there are both direct and indirect family influences on alexithymia. Lumley, Mader, Gramzow, and Pepineau (1996) showed the family and parental correlations of alexithymia in their research entitled, "Family factors related with alexithymia characteristics". This research composed of two parts; namely, the relation between the cognitive and emotional characteristics of alexithymia and family malfunctioning and mothers' alexithymia, and both were studied. In the first part, 127 young people were assessed using alexithymia scale (TAS-20). To assess impaired imagination, Cohen's Scored Archetypal Test, comprising of nine factors, was used and the FAD instrument was also applied to assess family malfunctioning. In the second part, 80 of their mothers filled in the TAS-20 about themselves. The correlation of mothers' alexithymia characteristics was studied using the same characteristics in their children. The results showed that the overall family pathology is associated with alexithymia. In particular, the difficulty in identifying feelings is associated with the affective involvement of a malfunctioning family, thinking with external orientation and partial control of family performance, and defective imagination with inefficiency in solving family problems. In the second part, the characteristics of mothers' alexithymia were shown to have a meaningful correlation with their children's alexithymia. This finding also showed confused family functioning and mothers' alexithymia are responsible in generating the characteristics of their children's alexithymia.

Tamplin *et al.* (1998) conducted a research with the title, "Family functioning and parents' general

health in families having basically depressed adolescents". Using FAD measuring instrument and GHQ, they compared family functioning and parents' general health in families with depressed adolescents (n = 60) and with a control group (n = 34). The average FAD scores and general health for the clinical group were found to be meaningfully worse than that of the control group. In 56% of the clinical group's families and 29% of the control group's families, the practical criteria of malfunctioning were observed. In addition, Naghavi (2011), demonstrated that early adolescent develop specific alexithymia characteristics as a result of family dysfunction in emotional or cognitive domains in her study. Berenbaum and James (1994) demonstrated the relation between alexithymia and family ambience in their research entitled, "Associates and retrospective history of alexithymia." Their research was carried out among college students and the findings revealed that higher degrees of alexithymia had a meaningful correlation with decreased expression in the family and lower emotional security feeling in childhood. Therefore, this paper presents the conceptual framework of the relationship between family functioning, alexithymia, family background and emotional intelligence of early adolescents.

#### 5. Conceptual Framework

Miles and Huberman (1994) defined a conceptual framework as a visual or written product, one that "explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied—the key factors, concepts, or variables—and the presumed relationships among them". The conceptual framework developed for this study integrates the family functioning model, alexithymia and emotional intelligence theory. Figure depicts the conceptual framework developed for the present study. The theoretical perspectives and literature review guide the identification of variables and the development of the conceptual framework.

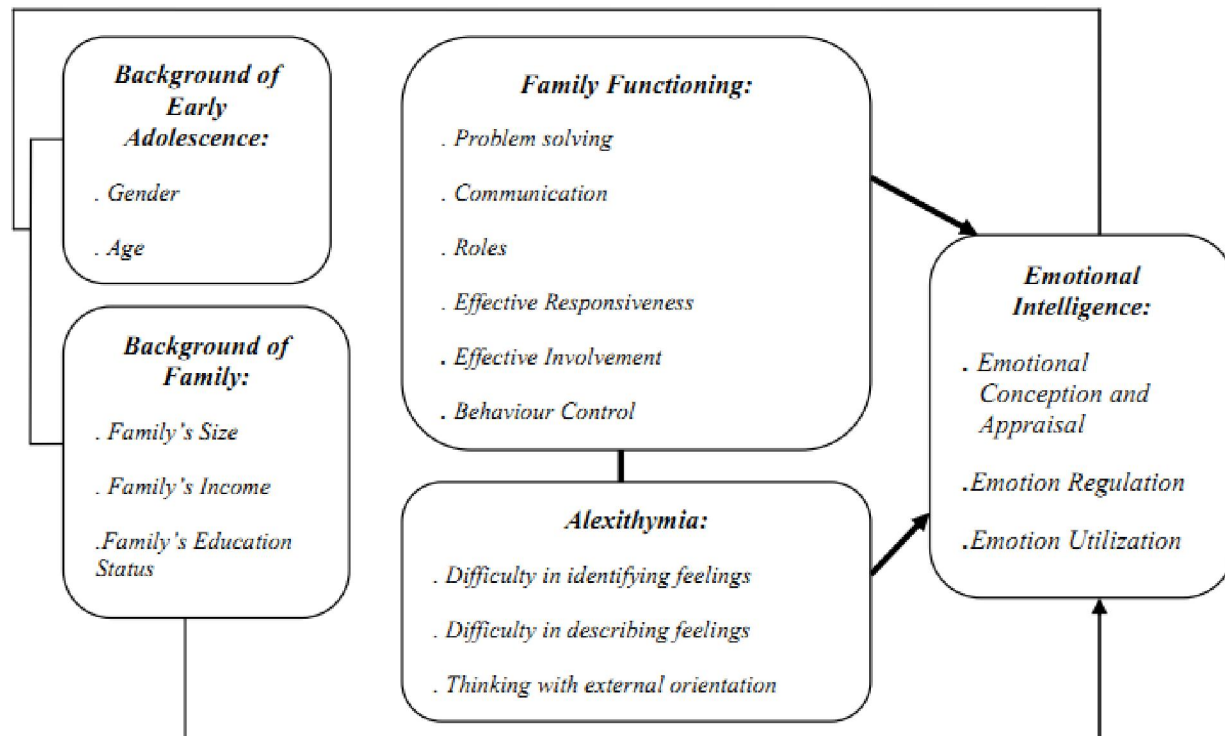
As illustrated in Figure 1 the conceptual framework of this study focused the factors affecting the skills of the early adolescents' emotional intelligence. This chart is divided in two parts; the first part is related to the assessment of the relationship between gender, family size, family income, family education status, and early adolescents' emotional intelligence, whereas the second part indicates the relationship between family functioning, alexithymia and early adolescents' emotional intelligence. Hence, the conceptual framework describes the relationships of family functioning, alexithymia and emotional intelligence. The framework, which is based on a theoretically derived conceptualization, incorporates family and

early adolescence. According to the relevant literature, early adolescents learn to express, understand, and regulate their emotions in interactions with their parents and siblings. Furthermore, it indicates that families are strong shapers of early adolescence's performance and their emotion is an important aspect of family functioning (Dunsmore & Halberstadt, 1997; Stover, 2003). Therefore, the second part of the conceptual framework illustrates the relationship between family as emotional coaches and early adolescents' emotional intelligence and their social behaviours. Hence, the focus of the conceptual framework is on the relationships between the independent variables of family functioning (namely, problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement and behavioural control) and alexithymia (i.e. difficulty in identifying feelings, difficulty in describing feelings and thinking with external orientation) as well as dependent variables of emotional intelligence (which include emotional conception and appraisal, emotion regulation and emotion utilization).

In this research, the relationships between the demographic variables and the key variables were also examined. As for the association between gender and emotional intelligence, according to the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1, there are several notable differences between the male and female adolescents. However, statistically significant gender differences do exist for several factors natured by emotional intelligence and girls were found to have higher emotional intelligence than that of boys (Katyal & Awasthi, 2005).

As for family size, family income and family education status in relation to emotional intelligence,

there are many assumptions about them. Some existing research indicated slight but significant relationships between emotional intelligence and family size, family income, and family education status. According Naghavi & Ma'rof (2012), parental emotion affect on early adolescent's emotion and social behaviors by its emotional regulation. Hughes and Carolyn (2002) pointed that our first parents during childhood are our siblings. Our relationships with them, even during childhood, include components which will later become significant in our relationships as adults. Some of these components include mutual dependence, role division, emotional communication and problem solving, agreement and conflict, as well as cooperation and mental health. In addition, studies around the world have consistently shown that family income is related to early adolescence's cognitive social development, emotional intelligence, personality characters and academic achievement. Similarly, Blau, (1999) believe that early adolescence of lower-class families are more likely to have low emotional intelligence and social performance and do poorly on standardized tests as compared to those early adolescents in the middle- and upper-class families. Furthermore, some researchers have found that higher educated family evinces higher emotional intelligence of early adolescents. Wiltfang & Scarbecz, (1990) have shown the importance of family environment, so the definition also covers the characteristics that determine the social status of the family, such as education level, occupational status and professions of the parents, as well as the quality of the residence, the working conditions of the parents and the relationships between siblings.



**Figure 1:** A Diagram of the Conceptual Framework of the Relationships between Family Functioning, Alexithymia and Emotional Intelligence among Early Adolescents

## 6. 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 background of early adolescents and their families, family functioning and alexithymia. Hence, this paper attempted to, shows that how those factors would influence on early adolescents' emotional intelligence.

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