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# Investigating the Relationship between Non-Conditional Maladaptive Schemas and Conditional Maladaptive Schemas among Students of Tehran Universities

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History:            Received 2 July 2019            Received in revised form 28 August 2019            Accepted 6 December 2019            Available online 11 December 2019</p> <p>Keywords:            Initial Maladaptive Schemas,            Non-Contingent Patterns,            Contingent Patterns</p>	<p>Given the importance of distinguishing between non-contingent and contingent patterns in the course of pattern therapy, the aim of this research is to investigate the relationship between non-contingent and contingent patterns. For this purpose, a total of 422 students from three universities, namely Allameh Tabataba'i, Shahid Beheshti, and the Central Unit of the Azad University in Tehran, were selected using multi-stage cluster sampling. To collect data, the short form of the Young Schema Questionnaire (1998) [1] was used. The data were then analyzed using correlation analysis. The results indicate a significant positive relationship between non-contingent and contingent patterns (<math>r = 0.530</math>). Moreover, a significant positive relationship was found between all domains of non-contingent patterns (abandonment and instability, impaired autonomy, and other-directedness) and all domains of contingent patterns (impaired limits, other-directedness, and overvigilance). With an increase in contingent patterns, non-contingent patterns also increase. Furthermore, the results suggest that the predictability of contingent patterns by non-contingent patterns is <math>R^2 = 0.28</math>.</p>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Initial maladaptive schemas are damaging emotional and cognitive patterns that have formed in the early stages of development and persist throughout life. A person's behavior is not considered part of the schema but rather maladaptive behaviors emerge in response to the schema. Thus, behaviors are derived from schemas, but they are not part of the schema [2]. The pattern-oriented model considers the schema as a broad and pervasive subject that includes emotions, memories, and cognition about oneself or interactions with others. This pattern is formed and cultivated during childhood or adolescence and guides human thinking about stimuli, becoming complex and largely inefficient over the course of life [3]. According to Martin and Yang (2010) [4], patterns are psychological phenomena that influence external behavior through the creation of coping strategies. Yang identified a set of patterns, which he called initial maladaptive schemas [5]. These schemas are associated with self and the individual's world and are constructed based on his or her past experiences [7]. Yang's initial

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maladaptive schemas refer to pervasive and enduring themes that are established during childhood, remain constant throughout life, and serve as patterns for processing subsequent experiences [7]. These schemas are related to self and the individual's world, constructed based on his or her past experiences (Leahy, 2003, translated by Hamidpour and Andouz, 2012) [8]. Yang (1998) suggests that initial maladaptive schemas are the result of negative interpersonal experiences during the early years of life, both within and outside the family [1]. These core beliefs fundamentally shape an individual's assessment of the world, others, and relationships with others. Initial maladaptive schemas are the deepest and longest-lasting level of cognition that arises during childhood, finds its way into adulthood, and is largely inefficient. These schemas distort information related to the individual's relationship with the environment and activate negative automatic thoughts, ultimately leading to abnormal attitudes and cognitive processing.

Initial maladaptive schemas are intricately connected with numerous factors, highlighting the considerable importance of these schemas and their impacts on life and the approach towards schema therapy. There exists a significant relationship between initial maladaptive schemas and personality traits, with components of neuroticism, agreeableness, and conscientiousness predicting the presence of initial maladaptive schemas. Personality traits also demonstrate a strong predictive power for initial maladaptive schemas [10]. Additionally, a statistically significant relationship has been observed between all initial maladaptive schemas (excluding the sacrifice schema) and justification of extramarital relationships [11]. Results from Najafi, Mohammadi Far, Bitaraf, and Zarei indicate that women seeking divorce differed in most schemas (except for approval/attention-seeking schemas) compared to ordinary women. Furthermore, cognitive insight between the two groups showed a difference in the self-assurance scale, but no significant difference was found in the self-esteem scale [12].

Research findings suggest a relationship between initial maladaptive schemas and social anxiety, indicating that individuals with social anxiety exhibit schemas in various domains [13]. Initial maladaptive schemas are associated with factors such as personality traits and mental health [14], substance dependence [15], parenting styles, and religious orientation [16], juvenile delinquency [17], depression [18], cognitive regulation [19], and more.

Initial maladaptive schemas can be categorized into two types: non-contingent schemas and contingent schemas. Non-contingent schemas are beliefs formed during early human development and often revolve around cognitive structures. On the other hand, contingent schemas, formed later in development, act as adaptive or avoidant patterns to cope with or evade non-contingent schemas that are negative and harmful [2]. Non-contingent schemas result from self-concept injuries during growth, listed in domains 1 to 3, while contingent schemas (listed in domains 4 and 5) are created to cope with or avoid the activation of initial (non-contingent) schemas. Over time, contingent schemas become more challenging and incompatible, ultimately reinforcing initial (non-contingent) schemas [21].

Non-contingent schemas leave no room for escape for the patient, resulting in feelings of incompetence, unworthiness, unlikability, misery, exposure to danger, and hostility. Nothing seems capable of changing this predetermined outcome. Non-contingent schemas succinctly encapsulate all childhood events, simplistically without any choices made by the child. In contrast, contingent schemas (compensatory) provide a ray of hope for the patient, creating a sense that they have the ability to alter outcomes. Patients can obey, seek validation from others, sacrifice, suppress emotions, and by engaging in these behaviors, perhaps even temporarily prevent negative outcomes [2].

Stallard's study [22] shows that children confirm 7 non-contingent schemas out of 8 non-contingent schemas and only one contingent schema (compliance) regarding themselves. Considering the significance of the relationship between contingent and non-contingent schemas on one hand and the fact that no research has yet addressed the relationship between these two types of schemas, this study aims to investigate whether there is a relationship between contingent and non-contingent schemas in students.

## **2. METHOD**

The present study employed a descriptive–survey research design aimed at examining the relationship among the study variables. The statistical population consisted of students from universities in Tehran.

The research sample was selected using a multistage cluster sampling method. Based on Morgan’s sampling table, a total of 422 students were chosen from Allameh Tabataba’i University, Shahid Beheshti University, Islamic Azad University (Central Tehran Branch), and Islamic Azad University of Science and Research. In the second stage, one faculty was randomly selected from each university, and the questionnaires were randomly distributed among students of those faculties. In total, 422 completed questionnaires were collected. After data collection, the relationships between variables were analyzed using correlation analysis.

For data collection, a single instrument was used: the Young Schema Questionnaire–Short Form (YSQ-SF), developed by Young (1998) [1], designed to measure 15 maladaptive schemas. The questionnaire includes 75 items, each rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from completely untrue of me (1) to completely true of me (6). A higher score on a specific subscale indicates a stronger presence of that maladaptive schema. (Ghiassi, Molavi, Neshat-Doost, & Salavati, 2011) [23].

The short form of the Young Schema Questionnaire encompasses 15 maladaptive schemas categorized into five schema domains, each represented by five consecutive items. According to Young (2003) [2], the domains are as follows:

1. Disconnection and Rejection,
2. Impaired Autonomy and Performance,
3. Other-Directedness,
4. Overvigilance and Inhibition, and
5. Impaired Limits.

Among these, the domains of Disconnection and Rejection, Impaired Autonomy and Performance, and Impaired Limits represent core (foundational) schemas, while Other-Directedness and Overvigilance/Inhibition represent compensatory schemas (Di Francesco, Rüdiger, & Stevens, 2015) [21].

Waller, Meyer, and Ohanian (2001) [24] reported a high internal consistency for the total scale (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.96$ ), with all subscales showing  $\alpha$  coefficients above 0.80. The test–retest reliability coefficients for subscales ranged from 0.50 to 0.82. Similarly, Sadoughi and Aguilar Vafaei (2008) [25] reported internal consistency coefficients ranging from 0.62 to 0.90 for subscales, and 0.94 for the total score.

In another study, Divandari, Ahi, Akbari, and Mahdian (2009) [26] evaluated the reliability of the YSQ-SF using both test–retest and Cronbach’s alpha methods. The average alpha coefficient was 0.80, indicating satisfactory reliability. The highest reliability was observed for the subscale Defectiveness/Shame – Dependence – Subjugation ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ), while the lowest was for Insufficient Self-Control/Self-Discipline ( $\alpha = 0.60$ ).

### **3. FINDINGS**

Based on the data presented in Table 1, among the students surveyed from various universities in Tehran, 57% were male and 43% were female. Regarding educational level, 60% were undergraduate students, 36% were master’s students, and 4% were PhD students. In terms of age, 77% of the participants were between 15 and 25 years old, 17% were between 26 and 35 years old, and 6% were 36 years and above. Furthermore, 87% of respondents were single, while 13% were married.

Based on the results presented in Table 2, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test statistics and their significance levels for the study variables are as follows:

**Table 1.** Demographic Information

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	Male	241	57%
	Female	181	43%
<b>Educational Level</b>	Bachelor's	250	60%
	Master's	154	36%
	PhD	16	4%
<b>Age (years)</b>	15–25	324	77%
	26–35	71	17%
	36 and above	27	6%
<b>Marital Status</b>	Single	369	87%
	Married	53	13%

Since the significance level ( $p$ -value) of the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test for the variable unconditional schemas is 0.000, the assumption of normality is rejected for this variable. However, the significance level for conditional schemas is 0.057, indicating that at the 5% significance level, there is no reason to reject the null hypothesis of normality for this variable.

Given these results, as the variable unconditional schemas does not follow a normal distribution, nonparametric statistical methods were used to test the study hypotheses.

**Table 2.** Kolmogorov–Smirnov Test for Normality of Research Variables

Variable	Sample Size	z-value	Significance Level (p)
<b>Unconditional Schemas</b>	421	8.45	0.000
<b>Conditional Schemas</b>	422	6.68	0.057

Table 3 indicates that there is a significant and positive correlation ( $p < 0.01$ ) at the 99% confidence level between all domains of unconditional schemas (Disconnection and Rejection, Impaired Autonomy, and Impaired Limits) and all domains of conditional schemas (Other-Directedness and Overvigilance/Inhibition).

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Variables

No.	Research Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1	<b>Unconditional Schemas – Disconnection and Rejection</b>	53	19					
2	<b>Unconditional Schemas – Impaired Autonomy</b>	38	15	<b>0.723**</b>				
3	<b>Unconditional Schemas – Impaired Limits</b>	27	9	<b>0.448**</b>	<b>0.409**</b>			
4	<b>Conditional Schemas – Other-Directedness</b>	26	7	<b>0.474**</b>	<b>0.464**</b>	<b>0.388**</b>		
5	<b>Conditional Schemas – Over vigilance/Inhibition</b>	28	8	<b>0.430**</b>	<b>0.332**</b>	<b>0.558**</b>	<b>0.427**</b>	

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

Based on Table 4, the following results were obtained regarding the correlations between unconditional schemas and conditional schemas:

1. The Emotional Deprivation schema showed a positive and significant correlation with the conditional schemas of *Subjugation*, *Emotional Inhibition*, and *Unrelenting Standards* at the 0.01 level, and also a positive and significant correlation with *Self-Sacrifice* at the 0.05 level.

2. The Abandonment schema exhibited a positive and significant correlation with *Subjugation*, *Self-Sacrifice*, and *Emotional Inhibition* schemas at the 0.01 level, while its relationship with *Unrelenting Standards* was not significant.
3. The Mistrust/Abuse schema showed a positive and significant correlation with all conditional schemas (*Subjugation*, *Self-Sacrifice*, *Emotional Inhibition*, and *Unrelenting Standards*) at the 0.01 level, indicating a strong interrelationship among these maladaptive patterns.
4. The Social Isolation/Alienation schema had a positive and significant correlation with *Subjugation*, *Emotional Inhibition*, and *Unrelenting Standards* schemas at the 0.01 level, but no significant relationship with *Self-Sacrifice*.
5. The Defectiveness/Shame schema revealed a positive and significant correlation with *Subjugation* and *Emotional Inhibition* at the 0.01 level, whereas no significant correlation was found with *Self-Sacrifice* and *Unrelenting Standards*.
6. The Failure schema showed a positive and significant correlation with *Subjugation* and *Emotional Inhibition* schemas at the 0.01 level, but not with *Self-Sacrifice* and *Unrelenting Standards*.
7. The Dependence/Incompetence schema demonstrated a positive and significant correlation with *Subjugation* and *Emotional Inhibition* at the 0.01 level, while its correlations with *Self-Sacrifice* and *Unrelenting Standards* were not significant.
8. The Vulnerability to Harm or Illness schema correlated positively and significantly with *Subjugation*, *Emotional Inhibition*, and *Unrelenting Standards* at the 0.01 level, but showed no significant correlation with *Self-Sacrifice*.
9. The Social Alienation schema (second occurrence as coded) indicated positive and significant correlations with *Subjugation*, *Emotional Inhibition*, and *Self-Sacrifice* at the 0.01 level, while its relationship with *Unrelenting Standards* was not significant.
10. The Entitlement/Grandiosity schema was positively and significantly correlated with all conditional schemas (*Subjugation*, *Emotional Inhibition*, *Self-Sacrifice*, and *Unrelenting Standards*) at the 0.01 level.
11. The Insufficient Self-Control/Self-Discipline schema also demonstrated positive and significant correlations with all conditional schemas at the 0.01 level, highlighting a consistent pattern of maladaptive associations.

Overall, these results suggest a systematic and meaningful interconnection between maladaptive unconditional schemas and conditional schemas. In particular, schemas related to emotional deprivation, mistrust/abuse, and entitlement exhibit the broadest range of significant associations, implying that early maladaptive beliefs rooted in unmet emotional needs or excessive self-focus may foster compensatory behavioral schemas such as subjugation and emotional inhibition.

This pattern supports the theoretical assumption of schema theory that conditional schemas operate as compensatory mechanisms derived from more fundamental unconditional schemas, reflecting adaptive responses to deep-seated cognitive-emotional distortions.

**Table 4.** Mean, Standard Deviation, Variance, and Intercorrelations among the Dimensions of Research Variables

15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	Variables
														1	Emotional Deprivation
													1	0.325**	Abandonment
												1	0.525**	0.502**	Mistrust /Abuse
											1	0.580**	0.401**	0.569**	Social Isolation
										1	0.692**	0.601**	0.482**	0.577**	Defectiveness /Shame
									1	0.677**	0.507**	0.531**	0.454**	0.468**	Failure
								1	0.722**	0.631**	0.510**	0.475**	0.484**	0.400**	Dependence/ Incompetence
							1	0.655**	0.598**	0.543**	0.445**	0.510**	0.494**	0.352**	Vulnerability to Harm
						1	0.491**	0.486**	0.473**	0.499**	0.394**	0.442**	0.436**	0.278**	Undeveloped Self
					1	0.233**	0.257**	0.174**	0.152**	0.218**	0.336**	0.261**	0.151**	0.220**	Entitlement

				1	0.568**	0.377**	0.426**	0.432**	0.399**	0.400**	0.445**	0.398**	0.384**	0.339**	Insufficient Self-Control
			1	0.449**	0.260**	0.597**	0.563**	0.589**	0.599**	0.607**	0.527**	0.512**	0.533**	0.432**	Subjugation
		1	0.247**	0.235**	0.251**	0.202**	0.078	0.027	0.061	0.070	0.086	0.161**	0.146**	0.110*	Self-Sacrifice
	1	0.179**	0.565**	0.440**	0.420**	0.362**	0.397**	0.403**	0.418**	0.474**	0.489**	0.424**	0.317**	0.459**	Emotional Inhibition
1	0.313**	0.346**	0.179**	0.323**	0.501**	0.091	0.152**	0.042	0.008	0.082	0.137**	0.175**	0.92	0.137**	Unrelenting Standards
16	12	16	10	13	14	9	10	8	9	8	10	11	12	10	M
5	5	5	4	5	5	4	5	4	4	4	5	5	5	5	SD

\*\* P < 0/01 \* P < 0/05

Diagram 1. Diagram of the Relationship between Unconditional and Conditional Schemas

Conditional Schemas	Emotional Deprivation	Abandonment	Mistrust/Abuse	Social Isolation	Defect/Shame	Failure	Dependence/Incompetence	Vulnerability	Undeveloped Self	Entitlement	Insufficient Self-Control
Subjugation	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Self-Sacrifice	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	+
Emotional Inhibition	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Unrelenting Standards	+	-	+	+	-	-	-	+	-	+	+

Note. “+” indicates a significant positive correlation between the corresponding unconditional and conditional schemas; “-” indicates no significant correlation.

As shown in Table 5, there is a significant positive relationship between unconditional schemas and conditional schemas, with a Spearman correlation coefficient of 0.530 and a significance level of 0.000. This indicates, with 99% confidence at the 0.01 significance level, that as unconditional schemas increase, conditional schemas also tend to increase. Furthermore, the predictive power of conditional schemas based on unconditional schemas was found to be  $r^2 = 0.28$ , suggesting that approximately 28% of the variance in conditional schemas can be explained by unconditional schemas.

Table 5. Mean, Standard Deviation, Variance, and Intercorrelation between Research Variables

No.	Research Variables	M	SD	1
1	Unconditional Schemas	118	37	
2	Conditional Schemas	56	16	<b>0.530</b>

\*p < 0.05, \*p < 0.01

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Table 5 indicates a significant positive correlation between unconditional schemas and conditional schemas. To interpret this finding, it can be argued that parental functioning leads to the development and expansion of internal cognitive models known as schemas. These schemas act as lenses through which individuals interpret, select, and evaluate their experiences [27]. Moreover, schemas formed early in human development often central to the cognitive structure constitute fundamental beliefs about oneself and others [2]. Therefore, childhood experiences, during which cognitive structures are established, may contribute to the formation of unconditional schemas as the primary basis of early maladaptive schemas.

Once unconditional schemas are formed, individuals attempt to cope with or compensate for these schemas through various coping styles. Some compensatory mechanisms may themselves manifest as schemas that emerge to mitigate the distress caused by unconditional schemas. These are referred to as compensatory or conditional schemas, which function as defense mechanisms against the underlying unconditional schemas. Over time, however, conditional schemas become more rigid and maladaptive, ultimately reinforcing the early unconditional schemas [21].

The findings of this study expand our understanding of early maladaptive schemas and the formation of conditional schemas derived from unconditional schemas. The results suggest that since conditional schemas arise as coping responses to unconditional schemas, clinicians after assessing a client's schema profile should identify and address the underlying unconditional schemas. Treating these foundational schemas may lead to a reduction or modification of the conditional schemas.

This study aimed to depict a general relational framework demonstrating a significant positive association between unconditional and conditional schemas. It is therefore recommended that researchers further explore how conditional schemas emerge from unconditional schemas and how these relationships can be utilized in schema therapy interventions.

One limitation of the present study is that it was conducted among educated participants within Iranian society, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Future research should examine this topic across different cultures, educational backgrounds, and populations. Moreover, therapists are encouraged to distinguish between unconditional and conditional maladaptive schemas, tracing conditional schemas back to their unconditional origins to facilitate more effective treatment. Parents are also advised to enhance their awareness regarding early maladaptive schemas particularly unconditional ones and to interact with their children based on an informed understanding of their schema patterns. Finally, scholars in the field of schema therapy are encouraged to conduct further studies to enrich the conceptual framework of schema therapy, particularly in the domains of interpersonal and couple relationships, limited reparenting, and cultural adaptation with a specific emphasis on collectivist contexts.

### **Transparency Statement**

The data supporting this study are available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to ethical and confidentiality considerations.

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### **Declaration of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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