

# The Relationship Between Attachment Styles and Individual Perceptions of God with the Mediating Role of Early Maladaptive Schemas in Women

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between attachment styles and perceptions of God through the mediating role of early maladaptive schemas among women members of a mysticism group in Amol.

**Materials and Methods:** The research methodology was descriptive-correlative and based on a structural equation modeling approach. In the proposed model, the dependent variable (perception of God) was defined as an endogenous variable, and the independent variable (attachment styles) was considered an exogenous variable. Additionally, early maladaptive schemas were included as mediating variables in the model. The study population consisted of all female members of the mysticism group in Amol during the first quarter of 2023. A total of 225 participants were selected from this population using a convenience sampling method. The sample size was determined based on Stevens's suggestion (as cited in Hooman, 2011), recommending at least 15 participants per research path, thus 75 participants were considered for each variable, culminating in a total sample size of 225. Three questionnaires were employed in this study: the Perception of God Questionnaire from Lawrence's (1997) Religious Status Scale, Hazan and Shaver's (1985) Attachment Style Questionnaire, and Young's (2003) Early Maladaptive Schemas Questionnaire. The proposed model was evaluated using SPSS version 24 and Amos version 24 software.

**Findings:** The results indicated a significant relationship between attachment styles and perception of God through the mediating role of early maladaptive schemas among the women of the mysticism group in Amol.

**Conclusion:** It is recommended to use training based on approaches to secure attachment styles among women to increase and enhance their perception of God. It is also suggested to use training in skills related to positive psychology for women to help enhance their perception of God using these approaches.

**Keywords:** Attachment styles, Perception of God, Early maladaptive schemas.

## 1. Introduction

One of the important components of spirituality is the perception of God. According to many experts, the perception of God is an internal psychological pattern of an individual's thoughts about God. It is essentially a process of combining and regulating a multitude of memories from various sources in relation to God. The perception of God is a psychological pattern of individuals' perceptions and experiences regarding God (Argyle, 2013; Belavich, 2002; Benson, 1973); it is a psychological state that relates to how an individual feels about God and how they perceive God's feelings towards them (Gorsuch, 1968; Granqvist, 2010). People's perceptions of God are divided into positive and negative. In a positive perception, God is seen as kind, protective, and guiding, which can play a crucial calming role in people's lives. In contrast, a negative perception portrays God with negative terms such as rejecting, unkind, and strict, which can lead to despair, aversion, and negative moods in individuals (Gorsuch, 1968).

Attachment theory was first proposed by John Bowlby (1969). He believed that attachment is a deep emotional bond formed with specific individuals in one's life, such that when interacting with these individuals, a person feels joy, elation, and security, and feels comforted by their presence during times of stress (Bowlby, 1973, 1979, 1980a, 1980b). Attachment includes three styles: secure attachment, insecure-avoidant attachment, and insecure-anxious (ambivalent) attachment (L. A. Kirkpatrick, 1992; Kirkpatrick, 1997, 2005; L. A. Kirkpatrick, Shaver, Philip R, 1992). Individuals with secure attachment perceive their caregivers as accessible, are able to trust others, and feel closeness and intimacy with them. However, in the insecure-avoidant attachment pattern, the person does not perceive their caregiver as accessible and cannot trust those around them, feeling less commitment and responsibility towards others. Individuals with insecure-anxious attachment exhibit variable behaviors and emotions concerning attachment and are often excessively dependent on others and frequently anxious about being abandoned (Collins, 1996, 2006, 2004).

Early maladaptive schemas are incorrect beliefs and assumptions that influence our interpretations, perceptions, emotions, and behaviors (Goharrizi Zandi, 2023; Radi, 2014). Schemas are divided into five domains according to the five developmental needs of a child: disconnection and rejection, impaired autonomy and performance, impaired limits, other-directedness, and overvigilance and inhibition, each encompassing several schemas (Shojaadini, 2018).

Therefore, object relations and attachment theories are rooted in early childhood, and early maladaptive schemas are also formed during early childhood. In fact, these relationships and mental interpretations form the basis for other relationships, including one's relationship with God. Psychoanalytic and cognitive theories, which underpin the perception of God and early maladaptive schemas, suggest that these constructs arise during the first relationships a child experiences with their caregiver, meaning that an individual who has certain patterns of thought governing their daily behavior may project these patterns onto their perception of God as well (Goharrizi Zandi, 2023; Radi, 2014). Given this background, the current study seeks to answer whether there is a relationship between attachment styles and the perception of God through the mediating role of early maladaptive schemas among female members of a mysticism group.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study design and Participant

The method of the present research is descriptive-correlational and based on structural equation modeling. In the proposed model, the dependent variable (perception of God) is defined as an endogenous variable, and the independent variable (attachment styles) is considered an exogenous variable. Moreover, early maladaptive schemas are included as a mediating variable in the proposed model. The research population consisted of all female members of the mysticism group in Amol during the first quarter of 2023. A total of 225 participants from this population were selected using a convenience sampling method. For this study, 75 individuals were considered for each variable, resulting in a total sample size of 225.

Initially, the research topic was selected, followed by the writing and acceptance of the research proposal. Subsequently, the researcher obtained an introduction letter from the Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon Branch, for the Amol mysticism group. After presenting this letter to the group, the researcher explained his objectives to the group's leader and, upon obtaining their consent, selected the participants and distributed the questionnaires among the women. Before administering the questionnaires, to adhere to ethical research principles, all participants were assured that the data collected would be used solely for research purposes and analyzed collectively and anonymously. If any individual did not wish to participate, they were free to withdraw from the study.

## 2.2. Measures

### 2.2.1. Perception of God

The Perception of God Questionnaire, adapted from Lawrence's (1997) Religious Status Scale, includes items related to God and is composed of 27 questions divided into two subscales: positive perception of God (items 1 to 21) and negative perception of God (items 22 to 27). The questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) to evaluate individuals' feelings towards God and does not have an overall score. Some questions are reverse scored. Construct and concurrent validity were confirmed by the developers, and Cronbach's alpha reliability for the positive perception of God was 0.88 and for the negative perception 0.86. In Iran, construct and concurrent validity were also confirmed by Khosravi (2004), with Cronbach's alpha reliability for the positive perception of God at 0.79 and for the negative perception 0.81. The correlation between the "positive perception of God" and "negative perception of God" in the research by Khaksari and Khosravi (2012) was found to be 0.77. Khosravi and Faizabadi reported a Cronbach's alpha reliability for the subscales "negative perception of God" at 0.76, "positive perception of God" at 0.85, "negative perception of God" at 0.83, and for the entire questionnaire 0.79. They also conducted concurrent validity testing and reported a correlation coefficient of 0.67 with the "Religious Attitudes of Khodayari" questionnaire, which is significant (Qabezi, 2018; Toopchi, 2023).

### 2.2.2. Attachment Style

The Adult Attachment Scale, developed from Hazan and Shaver's (1987) attachment materials and normed for students at the University of Tehran, consists of 15 questions measuring three attachment styles: secure, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent, on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Questions 1-5 pertain to the avoidant style, 6-10 to the secure style, and 11-15 to the anxious-ambivalent style. The minimum and maximum possible scores for the subscales are respectively 5 and 25. In the research by Besharat (2000), Cronbach's alpha reliability (internal consistency) for the subscales secure, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent in a student sample (1480 participants including 860 females and 620 males) were 0.86, 0.84, and 0.85, respectively (for female students 0.86, 0.83, 0.84 and for male students 0.84, 0.85, 0.86). Kendall's concordance coefficients (validity) for the attachment styles

secure, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent were calculated as 0.80, 0.61, and 0.75, respectively. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha on the measured population for the subscales secure, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent were 0.73, 0.71, and 0.78, respectively. In Iran, Mohammadkhani et al. (2017) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.64 for this questionnaire, and test-retest reliability was reported at 0.60. Besharat et al. (2003, as cited by Mahdavi-Rad et al., 2022) assessed the content validity of Hazan and Shaver's adult scale by measuring correlation coefficients between the scores of four psychology experts, which ranged from 0.73 to 0.76 for secure attachment, from 0.60 to 0.76 for avoidant attachment, and from 0.63 to 0.87 for anxious-ambivalent attachment (Parsakia et al., 2023; Shadanloo et al., 2023).

### 2.2.3. Early Maladaptive Schemas

This questionnaire consists of fifteen subscales and 75 questions covering the dimensions of emotional deprivation (items 1 to 5), abandonment/instability (items 6 to 10), mistrust/abuse (items 11 to 15), social isolation/alienation (items 16 to 20), defectiveness/shame (items 21 to 25), failure (items 26 to 30), dependence/incompetence (items 31 to 35), vulnerability to harm and illness (items 36 to 40), enmeshment/undeveloped self (items 41 to 45), subjugation (items 46 to 50), self-sacrifice (items 51 to 55), emotional inhibition (items 56 to 60), unrelenting standards (items 61 to 65), entitlement/grandiosity (items 66 to 70), and insufficient self-control/self-discipline (items 71 to 75). It is set on a 6-point Likert scale (1=completely false to 6=completely true) and encompasses five domains: disconnection and rejection, impaired autonomy and performance, impaired limits, other-directedness, and overvigilance and inhibition. These five domains were used for data analysis in this study. The validity of the Early Maladaptive Schemas Questionnaire was assessed using both Cronbach's alpha and the split-half method, with overall sample results of 0.84 and 0.81, respectively (Yousefi et al., 2018).

## 2.3. Data Analysis

In this research, to evaluate the measured variables, path analysis and structural equation modeling were used in the conceptual model that was designed. Path analysis is an extension of regression models that tests a correlation matrix against hypothesized causal models set by the researcher. Path analysis is also known as causal modeling, focusing on testing a network of relationships between measured

variables. Descriptive and inferential statistical methods (mean, standard deviation, and correlation) were used for data analysis. To assess the fit of the proposed model, extensive analyses related to the underlying assumptions of structural equation modeling were conducted, all through path analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM). Pearson correlation, using SPSS version 26, and structural

equations, using Amos version 24, were applied to test the relationships.

### 3. Findings and Results

Table 1 presents descriptive data including means and standard deviations derived from research variables.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics for Research Variables*

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Secure	8	19	13.13	2.22
Avoidant	6	22	11.08	1.54
Anxious-Ambivalent	7	18	12.43	1.37
Positive Perception of God	21	77	44.51	7.65
Negative Perception of God	6	20	12.81	2.72
Disconnection and Rejection	17	71	43.19	7.62
Impaired Autonomy	16	68	40.54	5.82
Impaired Limits	18	64	34.31	7.14
Other-Directedness	13	60	32.09	5.41
Overvigilance and Inhibition	17	71	41.39	6.77
Early Maladaptive Schemas	81	334	191.52	16.48

Table 2 shows values obtained from regression weights for determining the effect (B) based on the significance level derived from the t-statistic. The values indicate a significant effect of the exogenous variable (attachment styles) on the

mediating variable (early maladaptive schemas) and the final endogenous variable (individual perception of God), with significant effects at the 0.01 level.

**Table 2**

*Regression Weights and Critical Ratios for Research Variables*

Exogenous Variable	Endogenous Variable	b (Unstandardized Effect)	β (Standardized Effect)	t-statistic	P-value
Secure Attachment	→ Early Maladaptive Schemas	-0.241	-0.203	3.435	0.001
Avoidant Attachment	→ Early Maladaptive Schemas	0.227	0.193	3.398	0.001
Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment	→ Early Maladaptive Schemas	0.214	0.177	3.098	0.001
Secure Attachment	→ Positive Perception of God	0.291	0.210	3.512	0.001
Avoidant Attachment	→ Positive Perception of God	-0.250	-0.204	3.440	0.001
Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment	→ Positive Perception of God	-0.217	-0.235	3.712	0.001
Secure Attachment	→ Negative Perception of God	-0.244	-0.188	3.223	0.001
Avoidant Attachment	→ Negative Perception of God	0.226	0.194	3.400	0.001
Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment	→ Negative Perception of God	0.193	0.171	3.098	0.001
Early Maladaptive Schemas	→ Positive Perception of God	-0.242	-0.214	3.522	0.001
Early Maladaptive Schemas	→ Negative Perception of God	0.227	0.197	3.426	0.001

According to Table 3, the secure, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles respectively have a direct effect on early maladaptive schemas of -0.203, 0.193, and 0.177, and shared variance (R<sup>2</sup>) values of 0.048, 0.043, and 0.037. These attachment styles also have direct effects on the positive perception of God of 0.210, -0.204, and -0.235, with shared variance (R<sup>2</sup>) values of 0.061, 0.051, and 0.050,

respectively. The effects on the negative perception of God are -0.188, 0.194, and 0.171, with shared variance (R<sup>2</sup>) values of 0.042, 0.043, and 0.033, respectively. Early maladaptive schemas have direct effects on the positive and negative perceptions of God of -0.214 and 0.197, with shared variance (R<sup>2</sup>) values of 0.051 and 0.044, respectively.

**Table 3**

*Direct Estimates of the Model Using Maximum Likelihood (ML) Method*

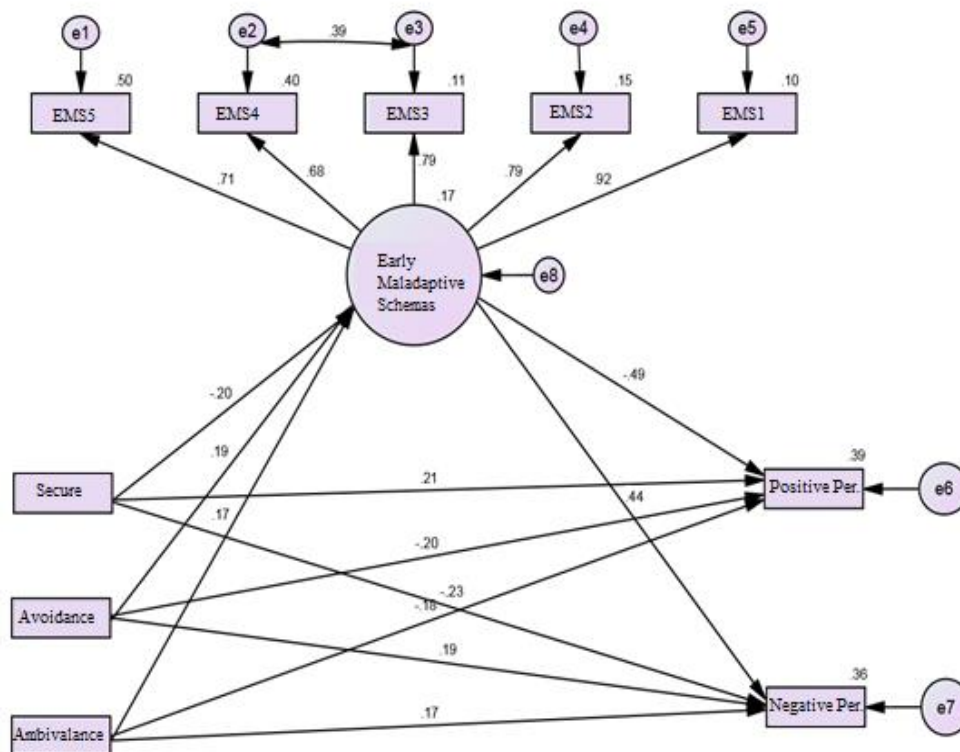
Variable	b	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>
Secure Attachment → Early Maladaptive Schemas	-0.241	-0.203	0.048
Avoidant Attachment → Early Maladaptive Schemas	0.227	0.193	0.043
Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment → Early Maladaptive Schemas	0.214	0.177	0.037
Secure Attachment → Positive Perception of God	0.291	0.210	0.061
Avoidant Attachment → Positive Perception of God	-0.250	-0.204	0.051
Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment → Positive Perception of God	-0.217	-0.235	0.050
Secure Attachment → Negative Perception of God	-0.244	-0.188	0.042
Avoidant Attachment → Negative Perception of God	0.226	0.194	0.043
Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment → Negative Perception of God	0.193	0.171	0.033
Early Maladaptive Schemas → Positive Perception of God	-0.242	-0.214	0.051
Early Maladaptive Schemas → Negative Perception of God	0.227	0.197	0.044

Table 4 presents the indirect effects of secure, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles on the positive perception of God mediated by early maladaptive schemas, respectively, with direct effects of -0.291, -0.272, and -0.250, and shared variance (R<sup>2</sup>) values of 0.237, 0.209, and

0.189. The same attachment styles affect the negative perception of God, mediated by early maladaptive schemas, with direct effects of 0.301, 0.262, and 0.239, and shared variance (R<sup>2</sup>) values of 0.246, 0.193, and 0.179.

**Figure 1**

*Final Model of Tested Pathways Alongside Predictive Statistics of Individual's Perception of God through Direct and Indirect Paths by Attachment Styles and Early Maladaptive Schemas*



**Table 4**

*Indirect Model Estimates Using Bootstrap Method*

Variable	Beta	R <sup>2</sup>	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	p
Secure Attachment on Positive Perception of God via Early Maladaptive Schemas	-0.291	0.237	-0.370	-0.224	0.01
Avoidant Attachment on Positive Perception of God via Early Maladaptive Schemas	-0.272	0.209	-0.356	-0.210	0.01
Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment on Positive Perception of God via Early Maladaptive Schemas	-0.250	0.189	-0.334	-0.198	0.01
Secure Attachment on Negative Perception of God via Early Maladaptive Schemas	0.301	0.246	0.389	0.233	0.01
Avoidant Attachment on Negative Perception of God via Early Maladaptive Schemas	0.262	0.193	0.340	0.201	0.01
Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment on Negative Perception of God via Early Maladaptive Schemas	0.239	0.179	0.302	0.188	0.01

In [Figure 1](#), the final analyzed model is shown with standardized effect coefficients in predicting the individual's perception of God through direct and indirect pathways by attachment styles and early maladaptive schemas. Specifically, the obtained values of the standardized effects of attachment styles and early maladaptive schemas on positive and negative perceptions of God are displayed. According to the obtained statistics from three fundamental indices—absolute, comparative, and parsimonious—the

research model was validated. Generally, both variables predict the positive perception of God ( $R^2 = 0.39$ ) and the negative perception of God ( $R^2 = 0.36$ ).

After revisions, considering indices, direction, and size of structural estimates, it was determined that the initial model needed adjustments for a suitable fit. After evaluating the final model and making adjustments by fixing free parameters in the first stage, the model with suitable fit is evidenced in [Table 5](#).

**Table 5**

*Fit Indices After One Step of Correction*

Index Type	Fit Indices	Acceptable Values	Obtained Values	Outcome
Absolute	Chi-Square Goodness of Fit Test	-	492.954	-
	Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)	≥.90	0.999	Acceptable Fit
	Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI)	≥.90	0.994	Acceptable Fit
Comparative	Normed Fit Index (NFI)	≥.90	0.994	Acceptable Fit
	Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	≥.90	0.996	Acceptable Fit
	Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	≥.90	0.999	Acceptable Fit
	Relative Fit Index (RFI)	≥.90	0.999	Acceptable Fit
	Parsimonious Normed Fit Index (PNFI)	≤.50	0.524	Acceptable Fit
Parsimonious	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	≥.08	0.039	Acceptable Fit
	Chi-Square to Degrees of Freedom Ratio ( $\chi^2/df$ )	≤3	2.541	Acceptable Fit
	Degrees of Freedom (df)	≤.0	194	-
	p-value	≥.05	0.01	Acceptable Fit

[Table 5](#) shows the obtained statistics from absolute, comparative, and parsimonious indices indicating that the adjusted model achieves acceptable fits and accurately represents the data's errors and variances.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

According to the results obtained, attachment styles have an indirect effect on women's perception of God within the members of the mysticism group, mediated by early maladaptive schemas, confirming the primary hypothesis of the study. These findings are consistent with the prior results ([Baratpour, 2023](#); [Ferenczi, 2021](#); [Hollman, 2023](#); [Radi, 2014](#); [Toopchi, 2023](#)).

In explaining this result based on the behaviorist perspective, it can be stated that secure attachment, which implies that an individual feels security and assurance in close relationships, can positively influence one's image of God. However, early maladaptive schemas may act as a mediator in this relationship and have an indirect effect on a positive image of God. A securely attached individual usually has close and trusting relationships with others. Such an individual may feel that God is attentive to them, loves them, and assists them ([Hollman, 2023](#)). Schemas may form due to insecure experiences in close relationships during childhood and adolescence. They can facilitate the formation of incorrect and faulty beliefs about God and the individual's

relationship with Him. If an individual experienced instability in close relationships and unresponsiveness to their needs during childhood, they might project these characteristics onto their image of God (Radi, 2014). These schemas can contribute to forming a negative image of God. Thus, secure attachment could strengthen a positive image of God. Schemas usually stem from insecure experiences and relationships during childhood and adolescence. Early maladaptive schemas can facilitate the formation of incorrect and faulty beliefs about God and the individual's relationship with Him. These schemas can create doubt and prevent an individual from establishing a close and meaningful relationship with God. Secure attachment, which indicates the formation of close and secure relationships with others, can have a very positive impact on the negative image of God (Radi, 2014; Shojaadini, 2018). A negative image of God implies having incorrect and faulty beliefs about God and the individual's relationship with Him. Secure attachment is usually associated with factors such as self-confidence, the ability to regulate emotions, the ability to communicate deeply and correctly with others, and the ability to engage effectively in close relationships.

On the other hand, avoidant attachment style, which means avoidance and distancing from close relationships, can negatively impact a positive image of God. However, early maladaptive schemas can act as a mediator in this relationship and have an indirect effect on a negative image of God. According to Mahler's attachment viewpoint, avoidant attachment is typically associated with feelings of mistrust and discomfort in close relationships (Hollman, 2023). An individual with an avoidant attachment style may feel that God does not pay attention to them and abandons them. These feelings can form a negative image of God. These schemas may develop due to insecure experiences and relationships during childhood and adolescence. They can facilitate the formation of incorrect and faulty beliefs about God and the individual's relationship with Him (Radi, 2014; Shojaadini, 2018). The individual may believe that God is flawed and that a relationship with Him poses a threat. Therefore, an avoidant attachment style may reinforce a negative image of God, but early maladaptive schemas can intensify feelings of avoidance and distrust in relation to God and prevent the individual from establishing a close and meaningful relationship with Him (Cherniak, 2021; Dezutter, 2010). Avoidant attachment style, which means avoidance and distancing from close relationships, can negatively impact a positive image of God. An individual with an avoidant attachment style may feel that God does not

pay attention to them and abandons them. These feelings can weaken a positive image of God. However, early maladaptive schemas can act as a mediator in this relationship and have an indirect effect on a positive image of God (Bradshaw, 2010; Cherniak, 2021). These schemas may develop due to insecure experiences and relationships during childhood and adolescence. They can facilitate the formation of incorrect and faulty beliefs about God and the individual's relationship with Him. Conversely, the anxious-ambivalent attachment style, which means a need for validation and attention from others, can negatively impact an individual's image of God. According to Klein's viewpoint, the anxious-ambivalent attachment style is usually associated with a feeling of needing validation and attention from others. An individual with an anxious-ambivalent attachment style may feel that God does not pay attention to them and does not provide validation. These feelings can strengthen a negative image of God. These schemas may develop due to insecure experiences and relationships during childhood and adolescence. They can facilitate the formation of incorrect and faulty beliefs about God and the individual's relationship with Him. The individual might believe that God also needs validation and attention, and in the absence of validation, He will abandon them. Thus, the anxious-ambivalent attachment style may strengthen a negative image of God, but early maladaptive schemas can help form this negative image in the individual's mind (Reinert, 2005; Rowatt, 2002; Schwaiger, 2022; Toopchi, 2023). Early maladaptive schemas can intensify feelings of neediness and the need for validation in relation to God, preventing the individual from establishing a positive and strong relationship with God. Early maladaptive schemas can intensify feelings of neediness and the need for validation in relation to God, preventing the individual from creating a close and positive relationship with God.

## 5. Limitations and Suggestions

The study sample only included women from the mysticism group, which cautions against generalizing these findings to other women or even men in the mysticism group. The researcher used self-report tools to collect data, which can introduce bias in expressing statements and beliefs. The first research suggestion is that this study be conducted in other groups and men, and the findings be compared with those obtained from this study. It is recommended to use training based on approaches to secure

attachment styles among women to increase and enhance their perception of God. It is also suggested to use training in skills related to positive psychology for women to help enhance their perception of God using these approaches.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### 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.

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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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