

## Relationship Between Alexithymia Regulation and Independent Living Readiness among Incarcerated Adolescents

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### Abstract

Little is known about how effectively incarcerated adolescents in Malaysia are prepared for an independent life upon their release from incarceration. One of the constructs that may play an important role in this issue is alexithymia regulation. Thus, this study is designed to examine the relationship between alexithymia regulation and readiness for independent living. In line with the study objectives, a two-stage cluster sampling method was used by this cross-sectional study in selecting the respondents from selected Sekolah Tunas Bakti in Peninsular Malaysia. A total of 255 questionnaires were distributed to incarcerated adolescents aged 12 to 18 years old. The findings revealed that the alexithymia regulation may not be as prevalent among incarcerated adolescents with a coefficient  $\beta$  value of ( $r = -.430, p > 0.05$ ). Nevertheless, there is a general lack of concern and the ability to portray feelings in several approaches. These capacities are thought to lay the reason for alexithymia regulation and the structure of healthy relational relationships. Likewise, a fundamental understanding of the readiness for independent living among incarcerated adolescents can be utilized as a source of output for the policymakers to provide a supportive environment for these incarcerated adolescents, especially in the Malaysian context.

**Keywords:** Incarcerated Adolescents, Alexithymia Regulation, Readiness for Independent Living, Tunas Bakti School, Rehabilitation Centre

### Introduction

Extensive studies and examinations have been done on incarcerated adolescents worldwide. These adolescents need to be in a healthier state of acceptance after they are discharged, which means they should be able to function and support themselves psychologically, socially and financially. Thus, they should be able to meet basic life needs as any other young adult

do. For the purpose of achieving holistic healthy life in these particular individuals, relevant supports and services are vital to them. The Malaysian Department of Statistics reported that a 12.4% rise in the percentage of repeat offenders between 2014 and 2015. This statistic suggest some weaknesses in preparing the incarcerated adolescents to return to society. In addition, between 10% and 40% of previously incarcerated adolescents were unemployed, and found it is challenging to remain employed.

The incarcerated adolescents, specifically at in Sekolah Tunas Bakti throughout Malaysia present a difficult case, both in terms of their development and rights. They are at an extensive risk of being overwhelmed and exhausted by the state of rehabilitation in the absence of proper guidance and support (Rickwood et al., 2007). Therefore, making conscientious efforts to ensure their well-being is essential. Despite the increase in the numbers of repeated crimes amongst incarcerated adolescents in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020), this is still a persistent issue that requires attention. Research has determined that these individuals face innumerable issues such as educational, behavioural, and intellectual problems when adjusting to the wider community after leaving rehabilitation centres (Cashmore & Paxman, 2007; Stein, 2008; Zeira et al., 2014). Hence, in light of the evidence obtained from these studies, there is an obligation to increase the level and quality of data on institutionalization and the consequences for these individuals when placed in rehabilitation care.

Previous studies have found that about 35% of incarcerated adolescents low high levels of alexithymia regulation (Gatta et al., 2016). Additionally, many of those detained have underlying symptoms of alexithymia (White et al., 2010). Furthermore, those suffering from long-term unmanaged alexithymia exhibit issues such as poor interpersonal functioning, substance abuse and reoccurring depression (Hammen et al., 2008; Richardson et al., 2014), which may contribute to not being accepted back into society upon release. The current study sought to address and improve upon the existing data regarding alexithymia regulation and readiness for independent living among incarcerated adolescents in Malaysia, by examining the relationship between the two. Studies in this field have been conducted, however, the research in Malaysia is inadequate and needs to be further explored. Therefore, the study extends the previous investigations by looking at the correlation between alexithymia regulation and readiness for independent living.

### **Alexithymia Regulation**

Alexithymia regulation is characterized by difficulty understanding and/or identifying emotions and this condition can lead to significant problems in social relationships or once they are out to the external world to re-socialize with the society (Poquerusse et al., 2018). It is a measure in understanding and describing emotions, personality trait and triggers certain type of post traumatic situations. It includes an inability to regulate affect through socio-emotional interactions Chen et al (2011) and has been linked to numerous psychological and behavioural disorders, including borderline personality disorder Verzeletti et al (2016), depression Bamonti et al (2020), and pathological gambling (Toneatto et al., 2009). Moreover, this alexithymia regulation plays a significant role upon the readiness of these incarcerated adolescents for an independent living. Therefore, it is thought to be important for the adolescents to know their level of alexithymia regulation regarding have support and acquire them with respected knowledge to cope for an independent living later (Gross & Jazaieri, 2014).

Moreover, there are a few ways in which the assessment of incarcerated adolescents with alexithymia regulation improves their quality of life. They could benefit from assessment that includes evaluation for anxiety disorders and depression, psychiatric treatments including psychotherapy or medication, social learning skills training, mindfulness techniques, socialization skills training or vocational counselling (Mankus et al., 2016). As all the above stated ways can help these incarcerated adolescents for the readiness for an independent living after leaving the rehabilitation care. On the other hand, mental health problems in incarcerated adolescents with alexithymia regulation have been attributed to difficulties in emotional regulation (Dalbudak et al., 2013). However, with the knowledge that alexithymia regulation may worsen mental health, future treatments should be examined that target alexithymia regulation among the incarcerated adolescents. In further, the significant association found between gender and alexithymia regulation is less generalizable to the general population, which is skewed towards males' incarcerated adolescents (Leshem et al., 2019). Thus, making the underlying basis of alexithymia regulation among incarcerated adolescents is still unclear.

### **Relationship between Alexithymia Regulation and Readiness for independent living**

Alexithymia regulation among incarcerated adolescents can be classified as a broad term to describe continuous problems processing their emotions from physiological sensations, and externally cognitive level (Bamonti et al., 2020). There are few past studies which revealed that alexithymia was related to the readiness in both re-socialization (Velotti et al., 2016) and independent living (Velotti et al., 2017). The term re-socialization as stated in the above study has proven that adolescent was having difficulties to start the conversation with to anyone of the authority. Perhaps, it has also inked towards another past study that found that adolescents suffer from alexithymia produce changes upon release in a negative cycle which significantly correlated with the readiness aspect as they perceive the likelihood of these incarcerated adolescents were not accepted by the society upon release (Velotti et al., 2017).

Narrowing it down, alexithymia appears to represent a risk factor for readiness for independent living among these incarcerated adolescents. Given the literature, it is hypothesized that alexithymia regulation is more prevalent in individuals with more worried features and associated with less healthy patterns of emotional regulation, which would then be associated with decreased of readiness level (Muzi, 2020). In other words, higher level of alexithymia regulation will be associated with lower scores on a measure of readiness (Gillespie et al., 2018). Perhaps, not only that, but broadly defined in another related source of research that incarcerated adolescents with high level of alexithymia regulation may not perform well in describing their emotions (Velotti et al., 2017), leading to worse outcomes in socialization upon being released out of the rehabilitation centre for having an independent living later (Keles et al., 2020). On another hand, analysing the profile of the adolescents who were placed at the approved school in Malaysia, their background and life experiences were diverse where some of them can be considered as suffering from 'conduct disorders', the rest were not necessarily pathological (Chiam & Chan, 2011; Daud, 2017). Due to a background of poverty, neglect, abuse, and other traumatic events, children in rehabilitation care often displayed mental health problems, performed below their academic ability, and became involved in juvenile delinquency. Thus, making these incarcerated adolescents in a high risk of alexithymia regulation. Perhaps, in the study of Nasir et al (2010), alexithymia regulation leads to poorer development of overall emotional intelligence which reflects to the intrinsic trait of difficulties in recognizing emotional components. Emotional intelligence is the control

of one's emotions judiciously in contrast with the effect of alexithymia regulation plays a significant role for a better quality of life.

In brief, with the consequences faced by these adolescents, it has been found that adolescents who suffer from long term untreated alexithymia do possess poor interpersonal functioning, substance abuse and recurrent episodes of depression (Hammen et al., 2008; Richardson et al., 2014), thereupon not being accepted by society upon release (Yosuff et al., 2020). Along with that, persistently another relate study also do describe that as for these incarcerated adolescents who do not seek out for support of social interaction, increased symptoms that may worsen alexithymia regulation, leads towards the reluctance or lacking readiness for an independent living among them (Preece et al., 2017). In brief, more studies are needed to illuminate these interrelationships among incarcerated adolescents.

Nonetheless, research investigating the path of alexithymia regulation which is primarily considered as a responsively engagement. Thus, from the literature it can be construed that the proposed the effect of alexithymia regulation may contribute to readiness for independent living. Therefore, this study aims to determine the relationship between alexithymia regulation and readiness for independent living among incarcerated adolescents in Peninsular Malaysia.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

The present study applied a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional research design.

### **Sample**

Using the two-stage cluster sampling method, questionnaires were distributed to 255 incarcerated adolescents (ages ranged from 10 to 18 years) admitted to approved schools in four locations throughout Peninsular Malaysia

### **Research Procedures Instruments**

The present study applied a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional research design in which the information on the variables of interest was collected via questionnaires. All instruments were translated using back-translation method until homogenous decision were matched against the original versions of the questionnaires prior of the distribution of the instruments along with the consent forms and guidelines (Essau et al., 2006). The first section consisted of the demographic information sheet which required the respondents to provide their age, gender, number of siblings, ethnicity, duration of stay in their respective approved schools, reason of being detained, parents' highest education qualification, parents' marital status and family monthly income. As for the second section, the quantitative self-report measures of variables comprising three main instrumentations as follows.

### ***Alexithymia Regulation***

Alexithymia was measured using the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS20; Bagby et al., 1994). The scale is a widely utilized instrument in both clinical and research settings for the assessment of alexithymia (Parker et al., 2003). The 20-item instrument requested the respondents to rate their agreeableness of the statement that describe their behaviours. Respondents answered the scale using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly

disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The total score of TAS-20 was used in this present study where higher scores indicate higher level of alexithymia regulation.

### ***Readiness for Independent Living***

The respondents' readiness for independent living was measured using The Readiness for Independent Living (Benbenishty & Schiff, 2009; Benbenishty & Zeira, 2008). The instrument consists of 21-items where respondents were asked to respond to statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*yes, for sure*) to 5 (*no, for sure*). The total score of The Readiness for Independent Living was used in this present study where higher scores indicate higher level of readiness for independent living.

## **Data Analysis (Results and Discussion)**

### **Bivariate Analysis – Pearson Correlation**

In this present study, Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted where the correlation between alexithymia regulation and readiness for independent living were investigated and the result was demonstrated in Table 1.0.

Table 1.0

*Correlation of Alexithymia Regulation and Readiness for Independent Living*

Variables	Readiness for Independent Living	
	r	p
<b>Alexithymia Regulation</b>	-.430	.067

Note: \* $p \leq 0.05$

Based on Table 1.0, the finding revealed that there was no significant relationship between alexithymia regulation and readiness for independent living ( $r = -.430$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Therefore, the alternative hypothesis was rejected. The findings was inconsistent with the previous study by Garofalo et al (2017), who revealed that alexithymia regulation was closely associated with readiness for independent living may explain unexpected findings generated in this present study. Nonetheless, although the present study's results show a non-significant relationship, the alexithymia regulation majority level among the incarcerated adolescents in this study is still in a moderated level (49.80%). This is because, a general lack of concern importantly, the ability to portray feelings in several approaches, and these capacities are thought to lay the reason for alexithymia regulation and the structure of healthy relational relationships (Dimaggio & Lysaker, 2015). The present study's findings suggest that the results of alexithymia regulation may not be as prevalent among incarcerated adolescents as has previously been reported. Previous studies postulated that alexithymia regulation was associated with readiness along with propensity for violence Gillespie et al (2018), worry Baker et al (2014) and well-being (Velotti et al., 2017). The inclusion of these additional affective and behavioural problems was beyond the scope of this present study. Nevertheless, the inclusion of these variables may contribute to the difference in findings of present study. Hence, the present study chose the exclusion of other factors which is beyond the study scope.

### **Implications**

This current study has demonstrated the implications of linking the underlying mechanisms of alexithymia regulation and readiness for independent living. Along with that, this current

study had added to the current writing literature on the field of readiness for independent living. Subsequently, this present study found that most of the adolescents were considered as having low level of readiness for an independent living (56.47%). This imply that readiness aspect may take into consideration seriously and should be concerned by governments, educators, schools, parents, society, and other parties so that lots of precautions can be taken to support and help adolescents to be able live independently. On the contrary, alexithymia regulation was not significant to readiness for independent living. Despite scholars found that alexithymia regulation was associated towards readiness factor Lavaf et al (2016); Brown et al (2018) that this current study did not confirm the association was unexpected. Nevertheless, the lack of this association revealed that possibility that readiness for independent living was more closely related to other factors than a lack of adolescent's emotions regulation difficulties (Te Brinke et al., 2020). Perhaps, as to this present study, the additional knowledge upon the existing research body has been added up by determining these relationships in an Asian context of Sekolah Tunas Bakti to enhance the generalizability of findings among the Asian population of incarcerated adolescents.

In short, apart from the practical implications for relevant stakeholders, policy developments are also essential focussing on the readiness aspects of incarcerated adolescents as a potential input. Primarily, the present finding may be useful and can be references for local assisting researches and practitioners to come up with lots of additional research and studies involving this vulnerable group of study specifically in Malaysia. Besides, the current findings of internal consistencies, reliabilities and attributes of the instruments used provided preliminary validations among the incarcerated adolescents staying in Sekolah Tunas Bakti throughout Peninsular Malaysia. Therefore, this current study is one of its sorts, approving and validating the Malay questionnaire utilized via back-translated scales which might lead few supports to future researchers keen on using the similar instruments as well in their relevant scope of study. Indeed, results of this study provided a fundamental understanding on the readiness for independent living among incarcerated adolescents in Malaysia context which can be utilize as a source of output for the society to provide supportive environment for these incarcerated adolescents.

### **Limitations**

Cross-sectional and correlation natures of research design which was used in this current study does not examines the adolescent's different stages of life in a whole manner. Thus, the findings could not come up to a fixed conclusion on the issues of changes of developmental influences which remain a bit unclear (Creswell, 2014). Besides, in methodological aspect, the present study's location was only restricted in Peninsular Malaysia, it restricts the result of the study as it does not address the entire local community excluding the three Sekolah Tunas Bakti in East Malaysia. The quantitative technique utilized in this study permitted space for potential inclination of bias in participant's response. However, the weakness is that, the accuracy of the results depends on the willingness and trustworthiness of the respondents in answering the provided questionnaire. The responses given on the questionnaire might be self-one-sided and slant towards positive ratings of themselves, which will impede the ideal reaction and response of the study and perhaps it's time consuming as open-ended items are used.

As well as that, studying alexithymia regulation and readiness for independent living across gender was not attempted in this current study. At long last, the impact of incarcerated

adolescents' readiness for independent living has gathered great research attention in the Western countries. However, there is still a wide gap of knowledge in local settings. Comparably, there are many other issues related to adolescents' readiness for independent living are yet to be explore, for example consequence of release upon rehabilitation period, readiness pattern and so forth. In the same time, there were very few instruments on readiness for independent living from local researches.

### **Recommendations For Future Research**

For effective enforcement of recommendations, future researches need to emphasise longitudinal or experimental designs to increase the accuracy result of the study in which observational methods or interviews are recommended to improvised adolescent's responses for future studies. Also, the urged to reach out to other region to empower and improve speculations of generalizations; greater samples by covering more locations and extensive racial and multifaceted diversity should be taken into consideration. Moreover, future exploration of research may include and affirm gender orientation among these incarcerated adolescents in Malaysia. To address and narrow these gaps, the vitality of future research to improve the existing knowledge and to create new insight is crucial to elucidate the perspectives of incarcerated adolescents on the readiness for independent living. It is necessary to come out with research that attempts to understand in the context of incarcerated adolescents' position, goals, and future ideas about pathways towards readiness within their perspectives. Future studies need to seek assistance and cooperation from the experts to produce more instruments that culturally compatible in local setting. Prior to that, future research must account for both stability and change in the individual by giving prominence to the interrelated factors surrounding the adolescent solely.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this article illustrated the relationship between alexithymia regulation and readiness for independent living; in line which draw attention to the dynamics of the study. Despite the breadth of knowledge linking upon the readiness factor, incarcerated adolescents set in rehabilitation centres confront high dangers impediments when transitioning to adulthood due to their individual and natural circumstances. Ready to know when they are being discharged, they confront prompt challenges as they endeavour to reintegrate into the community where they go up against critical obstructions to victory. Cumulatively, the findings of the current study have indicated that majority of the respondents scored low level on the readiness for independent living. Nevertheless, the variable associated towards the readiness factor; alexithymia regulation did not reveal any significant relationship upon readiness for independent living. Often, nothing is done to strengthen the relationship or to eliminate the contextual factors. Therefore, this article acknowledges that past studies or research regarding alexithymia regulation is very limited and the underlying basis of alexithymia regulation among incarcerated adolescents should be study in depth. Future studies should consider modifying the alexithymia scale in different aspect such as in-depth interview way upon the respondents and link with associated variables along in order to better fit the population of incarcerated adolescents. In short, along with the findings from this study, effective implementations and practices should be taken into considerations for future studies, in order to eliminate the challenges lying ahead and addressing the aspect of readiness for independent living among incarcerated adolescents in Malaysia strictly. It is hoped that this article helps to stimulate future research to improve and engage potential components of incarcerated adolescents.

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