

# SOCIAL PROBLEM-SOLVING IN FRESHMEN: THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL STABILITY, SECURE ATTACHMENT, COMMUNICATION SKILL, AND SELF-ESTEEM

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## ABSTRACT

*Freshmen during the pandemic faced some complex problems during their transition, including adjustments to the online lecture system and independent learning, task demands, and limited social interaction with lecturers and classmates. This condition required the ability to solve problems effectively and efficiently. The purpose of the research was to determine how emotional stability, secure attachment, communication skills, and self-esteem influence social problem-solving. Participants were 702 first-year students from university X who were active and domiciled in the Jakarta Greater Area and several other cities. The measuring instruments used were the Social Problem-Solving Inventory-Revised Short-Form, the Self-Esteem Scale, the Interpersonal Communication Scale, the Indonesian version of the Big Five Inventory for neuroticism, and the Secure Attachment Scale. Data were collected through an online questionnaire. The data analysis technique used hierarchical regression. The results show that emotional stability in the form of low neuroticism has a strong effect on social problem-solving, and this effect is stronger when the secure attachment variables and communication skills are taken into the analysis. When self-esteem is included as the last variable, secure attachment no longer affects social problem-solving. However, the total influence is simultaneously getting stronger.*

**Keywords:** communication skill, emotional stability, secure attachment, self-esteem, social problem-solving, freshmen

## INTRODUCTION

Entering college is an event that can be a stressful cause for freshmen they have to cope with. This condition is caused for various reasons, such as the possibility of getting an education that is far from the family, a heavy syllabus, and the inefficiency of existing programs in higher education. In addition, after leaving school, they also must adjust to the environment and new people, such as friends or lecturers (Krasilnikov & Smirnova, 2017). This transition to university exposes individuals to many new demands regarding interpersonal, social, and

academic relationships. The role of a student carries its own responsibility, which is expected to be more mature in thinking and solving problems (Tarasova et al., 2017). Arjanggal and Kusumaningsih (2016) have found that demands in an academic setting can cause emotional pressure in college students.

Especially during this pandemic, the freshmen face a condition where they must be more independent in applying new social habits and distance learning (Aucejo et al., 2020). When stress is not resolved, it will cause them to experience more psychological discomfort, which is a particular concern. A survey from Kumaraswamy (2013) has reported that around

10% to 20% of the student population experiences psychological disorders. Students who have just finished high school and then undergone a transition to further education are possibly experiencing significant psychological shocks because of experiencing multiple transitions, especially as individuals (Marcotte, Diallo, & Paré, 2018). The research results by Villatte, Marcotte, and Potvin (2017) have shown that more than 13% of freshmen experienced moderate to severe symptoms of depression. Nearly half of the participants have reported that the symptoms start when they enter further education.

These problems must be detected and addressed early on. There are indications of suicide ideas and suicide attempts of Indonesian teenage students due to intrapersonal and interpersonal factors (Putra, Karin, & Ariastuti, 2019). Nowadays, freshmen face more complex problems because of pandemics. Apart from academic matters, which they must have a good adjustment to the new system of learning as well, they are also prone to loneliness (Arslan, 2020). In relation to the situations faced, freshmen need to implement a process that can help them get out of problems.

A cognitive and behavioral process in which individuals direct themselves to identify or find effective or adaptive ways to solve problems in everyday life is known as social problem-solving. In this concept, problem-solving is defined as a cognitive-affective-behavior process that helps someone in finding flexible solutions to a problem (Khanh, 2019). The problem-solving ability itself is a relevant topic for freshmen (Albay, 2019).

According to Nezu, Nezu, and D’Zurilla (2013), social problem-solving is a cognitive and behavioral process used to find successful solutions to everyday problems. This happens because, in general, social problem-solving consists of two things, namely problem orientation and problem-solving styles, that help individuals have a clearer perspective on the problems at hand and determine the solution that is considered the most appropriate (D’Zurilla, Maydeu-Olivares, & Gallardo-Pujol, 2011). In an academic context, several studies have proven that the application of social problem-solving is closely related to the results of adaptation or regulation and students’ academic performance (Trunzo et al., 2014; Walker & Henderson, 2012).

One factor that determines individual problem-solving abilities is personality (D’Zurilla, Maydeu-Olivares, & Gallardo-Pujol, 2011; Koruklu, 2015; Myszkowski et al., 2015). This happens because personality traits affect how individuals behave, in which individuals with different personality traits will use different problem-solving strategies (Park & Antonioni, 2007). A significant positive relationship is found between neuroticism which negatively approaches problems, lack of self-confidence, and reluctance to take responsibility (Cam & Alkal, 2020). Emotional stability is a negative form of neuroticism, which means emotional instability (Kalokerinos et al., 2020; Widiger & Oltmanns, 2017). Individuals

with greater neuroticism show greater levels of hopelessness when encountering a problem, thus allowing more suicidal behavior due to lower levels of social problem-solving (Walker, Chang, & Hirsch, 2017). Neuroticism is also found to be highly correlated with negative problem orientation (Chow, Chiu, & Wong, 2011; D’Zurilla, Maydeu-Olivares, & Gallardo-Pujol, 2011).

Problem-solving skills are also inseparable from how individuals interact with others, especially families. There is general agreement that the relationship or closeness of parent-child in the childhood period affects the development of relationships with others and the psychological adaptation of the individual. Individuals who have secure attachments are not afraid of danger because they do not feel alone in risky situations; they tend to create positive relationships with others (Lovimi et al., 2018). The literature finds that there is a significant positive relationship between secure attachment style and constructive problem-solving. Besides, there is a negative relationship between secure attachment style and approaching problems negatively, lack of confidence, reluctance to take responsibility (Arslan, Arslan, & Ari, 2012).

Some literature states that communication skills and problem-solving are basic skills that students must have. With good communication, students will be helped in solving problems (Carlgrén, 2013; Minarsi, Nirwana, & Syukur, 2017). The ability of children to communicate first develops in the family, where individuals who come from families with warmer interactions tend to have better communication skills (Segrin & Flora, 2005). However, the relationship between communication skills and social problem-solving abilities has not been widely explored. One research confirms a positive relationship between communication skills and social problem-solving. This research confirms a positive relationship between communication skills and social problem-solving abilities (Lau, 2014). Efficient communication will encourage the expression of feelings and become an effective problem solver because it has a more constructive approach, resolves disagreements, and expresses feelings openly (Egeci & Gencoz, 2011).

Apart from the other independent variables, several studies are exploring the relationship between self-esteem and social problem-solving. Self-esteem and social problem-solving are related to each other (D’Zurilla, Chang, & Sanna, 2003; Srivastava & Kiran, 2015). Self-esteem can be defined as an individual’s positive evaluation or view of himself (McKay & Fanning, 2016). It is the main variable that affects an individual’s psychological well-being and social functioning (Griffiths, Parsons, & Hill, 2010). Self-esteem is also found to be associated with social problem-solving, which is positively correlated with positive problem orientation and negatively correlated with negative problem orientation (Bilgic, Daglar, & Aksoy, 2016; Koruklu, 2015).

In the life of freshmen, social problem-solving

has a significant role. The objective of the research is to determine the influence of emotional stability, secure attachment, communication skills, and self-esteem on social problem-solving in freshmen. The researchers are concerned about freshmen social problem-solving ability and hope that the findings of the research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the strongest influence on social problem-solving and generate further ideas about psychological interventions or training to the freshmen to strengthen their social problem-solving.

## METHODS

The research involves 702 freshmen. Around 446 students (63,53%) are female students, and 256 (36,46%) are male students. The mean age of the participants is 18,29 years ( $SD = 0,88$ ). All the participants are freshmen from various faculties in university X. Participants are recruited online from several campus locations in several cities and live in Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, Bekasi, and several other cities.

Participants participated in the research using an online questionnaire. The distributed online questionnaire contains informed consent, personal identity, and the scales of the study used. In the introduction, this questionnaire describes the inclusion criteria for those who can participate and a statement regarding the confidentiality of the research data. The research applies a quantitative approach. The design of the research is cross-sectional, which is non-experimental. All questionnaires are provided in Bahasa.

In the research, social problem solving is measured using a scale from Sorsdahl, Stein, & Myers (2015). This scale has 23 items with the example item "When problems occur in my life, I like to deal with them as soon as possible." The response categories on this scale are 'Absolutely Not Describe Me' to 'Highly Describe Me', and the score ranges from 1-5. There are five dropping items and 18 good items. The reliability of this scale is  $\alpha = 0,823$ .

Secure attachment is measured using a scale from Ahmad, Jahan, and Imtiaz (2016). This scale has eight items with an example of the item is "I prefer to express my feelings," with response categories ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Agree' and the score ranges from 1-5. The reliability of this scale is  $\alpha = 0,772$ .

Neuroticism is measured using the Indonesian version of the Big Five scale from Ramdhani (2012). Starting with the statement "I am a person who ...", an example of the item is "Worries a lot." The neuroticism section scale has four items with response categories ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree', and the score ranges from 1-7. The reliability of this scale is  $\alpha = 0,826$ .

Communication skills are focused on the family context. Communication skills are measured using a

scale from Puggina and Da Silva (2014). This scale consists of 17 items with the example item "I reveal how I feel to others". The response categories of this scale range from 'Almost Never' to 'Nearly Always', and the score ranges from 1-5. A total of three items failed, and good items are 14 items. The reliability of this scale is  $\alpha = 0,883$ .

Self-esteem is measured using the self-esteem scale of Rosenberg (1965). This scale has ten items, with the example item being "I feel that I have a number of good qualities". Response categories range from 'Very Incompatible' to 'Very Compatible', and the score ranges from 1-5. One item has been dropped, and nine items are good. The reliability of this scale is  $\alpha = 0,806$ .

Participants are given a freedom to decide whether to participate in the research or not. Willingness is granted by clicking the button that states it. After reading the preface of the study, participants decided they could continue filling out the questionnaire or quit and not get involved in the research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In Table 1, it appears that social problem-solving is correlated with all dependent variables. The strongest correlation is shown by self-esteem, followed by communication skills in the family, neuroticism, and secure attachment.

Meanwhile, more dynamic findings appear in Table 2 (see Appendix). The influence of neuroticism on social problem-solving can be seen in model 1. The inclusion of several other variables such as secure attachments and communication skills in the family strengthens the existing influence on social problem-solving. However, in model 4, it appears that when self-esteem is included as the next independent variable, secure attachment becomes insignificant in influencing social problem-solving. However, the total effect simultaneously on all independent variables on social problem-solving is getting bigger.

Social problem-solving is not an easy thing to do. This happens because it is in a context where the individual's ability to establish and maintain social relations plays a role in the problem-solving process. A well-developed relationship with the environment will make it easier for individuals to get environmental assistance when needed to solve their problems. A good social relationship cannot be lived by an individual when he/she is emotionally unstable. This emotional stability appears in the form of an individual's ability to control his feelings and emotions. When talking about neuroticism, individuals who tend to be neurotic, feel easily tense, anxious, uneasy, and anxious will certainly develop poor social problem-solving. The worse the emotional stability or the more neurotic the individual is, the more difficult it will be for the individual to develop good social problem-solving (Arslan, 2016; Cam & Alkal, 2020; Koruklu, 2015).

Individuals with neurotic tendencies will appear

Table 1 Correlation of All Variables

	1	2	3	4	5
Social problem-solving					
Neuroticism	-0,368**				
Secure attachment	0,254**	-0,232**			
Communication skill – family	0,371**	-0,293**	0,379**		
Self-esteem	0,531**	-0,427	0,383**	0,494**	
Mean	68,56	16,65	25,48	45,45	30,12
SD	9,27	5,93	5,12	9,82	5,62

Note: 1 = social problem-solving, 2 = neuroticism, 3 = secure attachment, 4 = communication skill – family, 5 = self-esteem  
 \*\*=  $p < 0,01$

less confident in problem-solving with the help of others (Cam & Alkal, 2020). Individuals like this feel unsure if their problems will be helped by others' help, experience reduced expectations, and become easily worried when faced with situations where they have to solve problems (Cam & Alkal, 2020; D'Zurilla & Chang, 1995; Walker, Chang, & Hirsch, 2017). Individuals with this neurotic tendency also find it difficult to trust others, so they often close themselves off from others when they have problems or refuse help from others.

Failure to make adjustments causes individuals with neurotic tendencies to develop un maximum social problem-solving. The stages of the cognitive process in determining responses to problems are disturbed by anxiety (D'Zurilla, Maydeu-Olivares, & Gallardo-Pujol, 2011; Thoma, Friedmann, & Suchan, 2013). Several studies confirm this by stating that the typical neuroticism seen from the amount of anxiety felt by individuals encourages them to develop a negative problem orientation (Clarke et al., 2017; McMurrin et al., 2001).

When individuals face problems, it is not yet resolved, and usually tend to be allowed to drag on. In some cases, individuals escape or avoid the existing problems, accumulate them and increase the problems' complexity. It can be understood that neuroticism will then reduce individual social problem-solving (D'Zurilla, Maydeu-Olivares, & Gallardo-Pujol, 2011).

Meanwhile, secure attachments affect social problem-solving for several reasons. First, the attachment style is formed when individuals are in their early ages and is carried and developed at least until adolescence (Arslan, Arslan, & Ari, 2012; Parrigon et al., 2015). Attachment styles, especially secure attachments, are also said to play a role in helping individuals develop healthy social relationships and choose appropriate social problem-solving when facing problems (Arslan, Arslan, & Ari, 2012; Henschel, Nandrino, & Doba, 2020). Second, secure attachments provide resources in the form of good examples and teaching, including emotional functioning, from parents to children to face life's pressures (Hall, 2015; Monti, Rudolph, & Abaied, 2014). Third, secure attachment encourages

individuals to properly regulate their emotions, including developing empathy in the dynamics of social relations and managing social conflict, both offline and online context (Egeci & Gencoz, 2011; Henschel, Nandrino, & Doba, 2020; Oldmeadow, Quinn, & Kowert, 2013).

The research also confirms the findings of the influence of communication skills in family settings on social problem-solving. Communication skills help individuals ensure that the message they want to convey is understood by others (Erozkan, 2013), including any wants, needs, and possible complaints.

Communication skills encourage individuals to be assertive and feel competent in expressing their own hearts and interests based on existing problems (Erozkan, 2013; Ibrahim, 2011; Lau, 2014). The need to express the desire to help individuals believe that they have the ability to solve problems with the help of others. Communication skills also help individuals develop effective and efficient social problem-solving (Arslan, 2010; Egeci & Gencoz, 2011; Lau, 2014).

Communication skills that are developed and carried out by individuals in the family are crucial. The family is the first environment in which individuals learn many things about life. Family is also a source of self-concept and self-efficacy (Bandura et al., 2011; Ertekin & Berument, 2019). Meanwhile, self-concept and self-efficacy help individuals develop good communication skills, especially in social relations (Yulikhah, Bukhori, & Murtadho, 2019). Positive self-concept and good self-efficacy help individuals believe that they are able to convey information in the form of their wants and needs or various other things in various contexts when conversing with others.

Furthermore, it is also emphasized that communication skills are one of the crucial contents taught in the family and have been seen by individuals since childhood (Arslan, 2010; Samadi & Sohrabi, 2016). When families, especially parents, are able to teach good communication skills to their children, they develop into confident individuals, especially in dealing with various life difficulties because they feel helped in conveying their needs and perhaps complaints.

Another important finding is that self-esteem is the factor that has the greatest influence on the

research. This finding is in line with the research results by Koruklu (2015) and Jang and Kang (2017), which also place self-esteem as a factor that has a powerful influence in influencing social problem-solving. Individuals with positive self-esteem believe that they are valuable people, view stress more positively, and can solve various problems in their lives (Hall, Crutchfield, & Jones, 2018). This self-validation effect encourages individuals to display various behaviors that are believed to be good for them (Nielsen, 2017), including one of which is social problem-solving. The research of Cong, Ling, and Aun (2019) states that individuals with high self-esteem tend to do problem-focused coping. Social problem-solving itself has a problem-solving orientation by considering the process and execution carried out (Arslan, Arslan, & Ari, 2012), so it is classified as problem-focused coping.

The existence of self-esteem in the regression model constellation makes secure attachment insignificant and strong enough to influence social problem-solving. This can be caused by an internal factor, and self-esteem makes individuals feel meaningful, valuable, and competent to make various problem-solving efforts, and no longer needs to depend on attachment things. The positive self-esteem possessed by individuals helps him/her develop various positive sides in themselves to face many life problems and develop into a better person. The strong role of self-esteem is also found to be greater than attachment in influencing various positive things that are the goals of individual life (Chen et al., 2017).

In general, the findings of the research can be explained by using Self-Determination Theory. Previous research that proposed Self-Determination Theory to explain problem-solving is research belonging to Lau et al. (2019). This Self-Determination Theory explains that individuals consciously and voluntarily try to determine the desired psychological outcome through the integration of knowledge and mastery capacity of the physical and social environment (Adams, Little, & Ryan, 2017; Deci & Ryan, 2012).

Deci and Ryan (2012) have also explained that individual determination is influenced by motivational factors and personality. The balance of the influence of the two will support individuals to develop behaviors that are most appropriate to the needs and context of the life goals they are trying to achieve. In short, it can be understood that social problem-solving is not an innate ability but must be fought for by individuals. Sheldon (2012) has stated that with this concept of determination, individuals can develop efficient problem solutions based on accurate perceptions of the problems at hand, are more resistant to pressure, and then able to control the environment.

Deci and Ryan (2012) have stated that the basis for the individual determination is the fulfillment of the need for competence. At this point, social problem-solving is a competency that is the goal of individual determination. Problem-solving orientation is the first

important element that individuals must have as part of their determination (Shogren & Wehmeyer, 2017). To have good social problem-solving, individuals must have good emotional stability, which is characterized by a low tendency of neuroticism, have secure attachments, develop communication skills in a family context, and have positive self-esteem. Combining these things will greatly assist individuals in having effective social problem-solving when facing various problems in their lives.

## CONCLUSIONS

Social problem-solving in freshmen can be explained jointly through emotional stability, which is indicated by low neuroticism, secure attachment, good communication skills in the family, and positive self-esteem. This finding means that social problem-solving is an ability that must be realized and cultivated consciously by individuals through determination. Meanwhile, self-esteem is the variable that has the greatest influence on social problem-solving. This indicates that as an internal source whose formation and development processes are strongly influenced by social factors, self-esteem is very important to be cultivated in family and social relations to help individuals develop effective social problem-solving.

The research contributes as a reference in curriculum development to improve the quality of freshmen in facing competition in the academic world and later work. Therefore, the researchers suggest the university of create programs to develop social problem-solving skills in freshmen, either through seminars or training programs, such as assertive training.

The research has limitations. The weak and insignificant effect of secure attachment on the fourth regression model suggests the next research using different research approaches. The consideration is about the fact that during the pandemic, the participants are at home with their family, and it means their secure attachment should be more pronounced. If the perspective of secure attachment is retrospective, then this problem might be answered with a different research approach to complete it. On the other hand, experimental research can be carried out to accommodate the gap left by the research as an effort to prove whether self-esteem is true through assertiveness training can increase social problem-solving.

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## Appendix

Table 2 Hierarchical Regression of All Independent Variables

Variables	B	T	R	R <sup>2</sup>	ΔR <sup>2</sup>	ΔF
Model 1			0,368	0,135	0,134	109,552**
Neuroticism	-0,368	-10,467**				
Model 2			0,407	0,166	0,163	69,328**
Neuroticism	-0,326	-9,192**				
Secure attachment	0,179	5,030**				
Model 3			0,468	0,219	0,215	65,156**
Neuroticism	-0,271	-7,673**				
Secure attachment	0,094	2,584*				
Communication skill – family	0,256	6,897**				
Model 4			0,564	0,319	0,315	81,468**
Neuroticism	-0,159	-4,566**				
Secure attachment	0,020	0,569				
Communication skill – family	0,122	3,287**				
Self-esteem	0,395	10,104**				

Note: \* =  $p < 0,05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0,01$