



ALEXITHYMIA AND INDUCED MOODS IN ALCOHOL-DEPENDENT MALES

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Summary—37 male alcoholics were divided into alexithymic, borderline, and nonalexithymic groups that underwent musical mood inductions that included shifts in the valence of classical musical selections to produce contrast effects: (a) from positive to negative to positive, and (b) from negative to positive to negative. At baseline, the alexithymic group was higher on negative affect than the other two groups, but the alexithymic and nonalexithymic groups did not differ on positive affect. Although all inductions produced negative changes in affect, the six kinds of inductions were ordered as theoretically predicted in terms of the one expected to produce the least (i.e. positive music, double shift) to the most (i.e. negative music, double shift) negative change in affect from baseline, when positive affect was the dependent variable. Larger changes in negative affect from baseline were induced in the alexithymic than the other groups, when magnitude but not direction of change was measured. The results support the utility of using shifts among stimuli of positive and negative emotional valence to create inductions of different intensities. They also call into question the view that alexithymics are unable to recognize and express emotions, regardless of their valence. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

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INTRODUCTION

According to its Greek origin, the term alexithymia literally means an 'inability to find the soul in speech'. The concept was first introduced in an effort to account for the symptoms of psychosomatic patients, who appear to deny the subjective components of painful emotions and exaggerate the physical concomitants (Sifneos, Apfel-Savitz & Frankel, 1977). However, the concept is now used more broadly to refer to an inability to recognize and express emotions.

To measure alexithymia, self-report instruments have been developed, the most commonly used of which is the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS; Taylor, Ryan & Bagby, 1985). On the TAS, persons with alexithymia endorse items such as "I often don't know why I am angry"; "It is difficult for me to find the right words for my feelings"; and "Being in touch with emotions is essential" (negatively keyed). The TAS is internally consistent and has strong construct validity (Bagby, Taylor & Atkinson, 1988) and test-retest reliability and criterion validity (Taylor, Bagby, Ryan, Parker, Doody & Keefe, 1988). On the test, persons with various kinds of psychiatric disorders have been found to be more alexithymic than nonpatient controls, including those with panic and obsessive-compulsive disorders (Zeitlin & McNally, 1993), eating disorders (Laquatra & Clopton, 1994), and alcohol dependence and other forms of substance abuse (e.g. Taylor, Parker & Bagby, 1990).

Research findings suggest a causal link between alexithymia and alcohol dependence. For example, individuals who are at higher future risk for developing problems with alcohol are more alexithymic than those at lower future risk. Furthermore, alcohol has stronger stress dampening effects for the more alexithymic (higher future risk) individuals than the less alexithymic ones (Finn, Martin & Pihl, 1987; Finn & Pihl, 1988). Other research findings suggest a causal link between alexithymia and emotional disturbances. For example, alexithymia is positively related to trait measures of negative emotions, particularly depression among alcoholics (e.g. Haviland, Hendryx, Cummings, Shaw & MacMurray, 1991; Hendryx, Haviland & Shaw, 1991; for exceptions see Lumley, Downey, Stettner, Wehmer & Pomerleau, 1994; Parker, Bagby & Taylor, 1991). These findings contradict the notion that alexithymic individuals have a general inability to recognize and express emotions, regardless of their valence.

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The purpose of the present study was to clarify two aspects of the relationship between alexithymia and alcohol dependence. First, we assessed whether alcohol-dependent males are deficient in their ability to recognize and express both positive and negative emotions, or whether the deficit is restricted to emotions of only one valence. To address this issue, we used the Positive and Negative Affect Scales (PANAS, Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988) to measure alcoholics' affect along two separate dimensions, positive affect (PA) and negative affect (NA). The PA scale measures enthusiasm, alertness, and positive engagement with the environment; the NA scale measures subjective discomfort and distress. The PANAS scales are internally consistent, essentially uncorrelated with each other, and sensitive to short- and long-term changes in affect, and they have good test-retest reliability and both internal and external validity (Watson *et al.*, 1988). Hence, these scales are ideal for assessing the relative degree to which alexithymic alcoholics experience the two different kinds of affect.

Second, we used an experimental mood manipulation to assess alexithymic alcoholics' affective reactions to emotion-arousing stimuli. We chose manipulations that were intended to induce either positive or negative changes in affect, and each at different degrees of intensity. Again, we measured Ss' reactions to the inductions with the PANAS along the two different affective dimensions. With regard to the second aim, our first task was to identify an appropriate experimental mood manipulation to use. Because (a) the Velten (1968) technique (the most commonly used manipulation) has sometimes been criticized for its demand characteristics (see Martin, 1990; Polivy & Doyle, 1980), and (b) musical mood manipulations offer several advantages over other techniques, we chose to use musical manipulations. Specifically, musical inductions have been shown to be effective in inducing both PA and NA, and such induced affect appears not to be caused by demand characteristics (Albersnagel, 1988; Pignatiello, Camp & Rasar, 1986; Larsen, Sinnett & Kasimatis, 1988).

To vary the intensity of the positive and negative inductions, we sought to produce contrast effects (see Cox, 1975; Flaherty, 1982) between the stimuli of positive or negative valence. A positive contrast effect occurs when the positive emotional reaction to a positive valenced stimulus is more intense if it follows presentation of a negative valenced stimulus than if it does not. A negative contrast effect occurs when the negative emotional reaction to a negative valenced stimulus is more intense if it follows presentation of a positive valenced stimulus than if it does not. Contrast effects have previously been demonstrated through a variety of perceptual (e.g., Wedell, Parducci & Geiselman, 1987), attitudinal (Miller, Ashton & Mishal, 1990), and emotional (Brickman, Coates & Janoff-Bulman, 1978) reactions.

In the present study, we shifted among musical selections of contrasting positive and negative valence. That is, on one day Ss heard music in a positive-negative-positive order, while on a different day, they heard a negative-positive-negative order. We expected that the single shifts (i.e. 'from positive to negative'/'from negative to positive') would produce stronger changes in affect from baseline than pure inductions, and that the double shifts (i.e. 'from positive to negative to positive'/'from negative to positive to negative') would induce still stronger changes. Moreover, we expected to find differential responsivity by alexithymic and nonalexithymic alcoholics to the inductions of different valences and intensities.

METHOD

Subjects

Ss were 37 males attending an inpatient alcohol rehabilitation program who volunteered to participate. Their mean age was 40.4 years ($SD=9.8$). All patients had a primary diagnosis of alcohol dependence according to DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) criteria.

Stimuli

The stimuli for the mood inductions were recorded on two 24-min cassette tapes. One tape contained an 8-min segment of positive music, followed by an 8-min segment of negative music, followed by an 8-min segment of positive music. The other tape contained three different 8-min segments of music that were arranged with the valences in the reverse order of those on the first

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