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The psychosemantic approach to alexithymia

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Abstract

The purpose was to explore the nature of alexithymia by applying the psychosemantic approach based on the system of meaning (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1990). The main examined issues were whether alexithymia is a trait or some other personality disposition, what are its cognitive characteristics, and what are the dynamics of the reputed non-emotionality of alexithymia. The participants were 100 undergraduates of both genders who completed the TAS-20 and the Meaning Test. The TAS-20 yielded a total score as well as scores for three subscales. The Meaning Test yielded the subject's meaning profile, namely, the frequencies with which the subject used the different meaning variables in responding to the Meaning Test. Correlating the TAS-20 scores with the meaning profiles yielded the patterns of meaning variables corresponding to alexithymia, namely, the sets of meaning variables correlated significantly with the alexithymia scores. Analyzing these patterns in line with criteria previously identified as characteristic for personality traits showed that none of the alexithymia scores was trait-identical but the total score and the scores of two subscales were trait-similar. The pattern included also a characteristic cognitive cluster of focusing on concreteness and avoiding the internal world, resembling the *pensée opératoire*. In addition, it included evidence for concern with emotionality evoked in others but avoidance of experienced emotions. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Alexithymia: an affecto-cognitive personality construct

The study deals with analyzing the personality and cognitive characteristics of alexithymia (AL) in terms of the psychosemantic approach, which focuses on the meaning assignment tendencies characteristic of the individual (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1990). The major defining features of AL are

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(1) difficulty to identify, label and describe feelings; (2) difficulty to distinguish between feelings and the physical sensations of emotional arousal; (3) impoverishment of fantasy life; and (4) focusing on concrete aspects of external events (Marty & M'Uzan, 1963; Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997).

AL is generally considered as a defect in the self-regulation of affect. Affect regulation is a complex process involving interactions between the neurophysiological, motor-expressive and cognitive-experiential systems of emotion. Hence, the defect is manifested in different forms, such as inability to conceptualize affect, to differentiate between emotions, to experience emotion consciously, or to elaborate stress transformed automatically into somatic dysfunction (Nemiah, 2000). The etiology of AL is still not determined. According to one, amply supported position, it is considered as a developmental defect due to deficient emotional learning in childhood, reflecting both inadequate caring and disturbed attachment as well as deficient cognitive development of symbolization and fantasy. The split between affect and cognition is enhanced in later developmental stages and brings about deleterious outcomes in the medical and psychic domains (Taylor et al., 1997). Others consider AL as a posttraumatic defensive response consisting in regressive dedifferentiation and resomatization of affect, manifested in a loss of integration and of the ability to carry out self-caring and self-integrating functions (Krystal & Krystal, 1988). Still others examine AL from the neuroanatomical viewpoint and consider it as due to a circumscribed lesion in the anterior cingulate cortex, similar to other neurological lesions associated with abnormal emotional behavior (Lane, Ahern, Schwartz, & Kaszniak, 1997).

Two assumptions are common to all approaches: the first is that AL is a pervasive personality tendency, manifested in several important domains, and the second is that cognition plays an important role in the determination and manifestations of AL. The affinity of AL to personality is evident in the common references to it as a personality dimension (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1993a), a personality trait (Taylor, Bagby, Ryan, & Parker, 1990; Wise, Mann, & Shay, 1992), as both trait and state (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1993a), or as a personality structure (Bach, Bach, Bohmer, & Nutzinger, 1994). The pervasive nature of AL is supported by studies showing its role in various social and emotional behaviors, such as inadequate recognition of emotions (Lane, Sechrest, Riedel, Weldon, Kaszniak, & Schwartz, 1996), low social sharing of negative events (Luminet, Zech, Rime, & Wagner, 2000), poorly developed verbal ability (Lamberty & Holt, 1995), and mainly in a variety of physical and psychiatric disorders (e.g. Kreitler, Gohar, Eldar, Ezer, & Niv, 1995a).

The major role played by cognition in regard to AL was evident from the early emphasis on the cognitive deficiency in AL, in particular the “*pensée opératoire*”, characterized by focusing on specific concrete details and actional aspects (Marty & de M'Uzan, 1963), limited fantasy and dearth of symbolic capacity (Demers-Desrosiers, Cohen, Catchlove, & Ramsay, 1983). Later research uncovered specific cognitive deficiencies correlated with AL, for example, slower color naming of emotional words (Parker, Taylor, & Bagby, 1993), sensitivity to the negative valence of stimuli at the pre-attentive level (Suslow, 1998), impaired verbal and nonverbal recognition of emotional stimuli (Lane et al., 1996) and reduced daydreaming (Kirmayer & Robbins, 1993). In recent years, the function of cognition in AL gained an enhanced theoretical support through the conceptions that cognition co-determines emotions (Lazarus, 1991) and self-regulation of emotions (Izard & Kobak, 1991), and plays a major role in the cognitive-developmental model of emotion organization and awareness (Lane & Schwartz, 1987).

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