



Alexithymia and individual differences in emotional expression

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Available online 21 April 2007

Abstract

Two studies examined verbal and nonverbal expression in relation to facets of alexithymia. Participants were videotaped while they talked about negative and positive events that had happened to them. Persons high in difficulty identifying feelings were less emotionally expressive, nonverbally, of positive emotion during a positive talk, and of negative emotion during a negative talk. Other facets of alexithymia were not independently related to expressiveness. Verbal expressiveness was not independently related to any facet of alexithymia. Study 2 showed that these relationships were independent of whether the participant was alone or with another. The implications for the understanding of the nature of the deficit in alexithymia, and of the effects of disclosure are discussed.

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Keywords: Alexithymia; Emotion; Disclosure; Verbal expression; Nonverbal expression

1. The nature of alexithymia

The term *alexithymia* was coined by Sifneos (1972) to describe the characteristics of “psychosomatic” patients, namely diminished fantasy, a tendency to describe at length details of external reality, such as physical ailments, without referring to their inner, emotional impact, and difficulties in verbally expressing their emotions (Nemiah & Sifneos, 1970). Bagby, Taylor, Parker, and Dickens (2006) showed that alexithymia comprises two general deficits, each with two facets: reduced *affective awareness*, shown as the facets

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difficulty in identifying feelings and difficulty in describing feelings to others; and *operative thinking*, a cognitive style characterized by externally oriented thinking and reduced imaginal processes. The underlying issue in alexithymia has been characterized as a deficit in the symbolization of emotion (Nemiah & Sifneos, 1970), or in the processing and regulation of emotion (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997). Elevated levels of alexithymia have been found to be associated with a wide variety of disturbances in physical and mental health (see Quinton & Wagner, 2005), although Lumley (2004) has argued that they are related to illness behavior rather than to disease processes.

2. Alexithymia and verbal expressiveness

Although deficient symbolization of emotion has been viewed as the core problem in alexithymia, only five studies have examined verbal emotional expressiveness in alexithymia. Three of these studies reported reduced verbal expressiveness in persons high in alexithymia (Luminet, Rimé, Bagby, & Taylor, 2004; Roedema & Simons, 1999; Solano, Domati, Pecci, Persichetti, & Colaci, 2003). One of these studies found this relationship specifically between the alexithymia facet difficulty describing feelings (DDF) and the proportion of emotion words used when people viewed an emotionally loaded film and subsequently recounted the episode they found most emotional (Luminet et al., 2004). Two studies showed no relationships between alexithymia and verbal expressiveness (Paez, Velasco, & Gonzalez, 1999; Smyth, Anderson, Hockemeyer, & Stone, 2002). For example, no significant correlations between the use of either positive or negative emotional words and alexithymia were found by Paez et al. (1999) in participants' emotional essays. However, this study did show that self-references and ratings of introspective content were both inversely related to alexithymia.

Only this last study separately assessed positive expressiveness, and it did not find a significant correlation. It remains to be established if the deficit is associated with emotions in general or with negative emotions in particular. Only one study (Luminet et al., 2004) examined different facets of alexithymia, and found a negative relationship between emotion language and DDF. Although the deficit has most clearly been described in spoken language, two of the studies used written rather than oral statements about emotional events.

3. Alexithymia and nonverbal expressiveness

In addition to this verbal deficit, it has been posited that alexithymia is linked to a paucity of spontaneous displays of facial expression of emotion (Bagby & Taylor, 1997). Haviland and Reise (1996) derived prototypical descriptions of alexithymic individuals from judgments made by 13 authorities. Although *being facially and/or gesturally expressive* was judged to be "quite uncharacteristic" of alexithymic individuals, *emphasizing communication through action and nonverbal behavior* was rated as "extremely characteristic". Thus, a distinction is made between what might be termed spontaneous nonverbal expression of emotion, which appears to be attenuated in alexithymic individuals, and the intentional nonverbal communication of emotion, which seems to be enhanced in alexithymia, at least in comparison with verbal communication. It is unlikely that any particular situation would show solely spontaneous or intentional expressive behavior. However, we can envisage a continuum from instructed posed expressions, which might be largely

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