

# Understanding alexithymia: Associations with peer attachment style and mind-mindedness

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## Abstract

Associations between alexithymia, peer attachment, and mind-mindedness (the tendency to describe people with reference to their emotions and cognitions) were explored in a questionnaire-based study of British undergraduates ( $N = 270$ ). Positive associations were seen between attachment anxiety and (a) overall alexithymia scores, (b) Difficulty Identifying Feelings, and (c) Difficulty Describing Feelings. Attachment avoidance was positively associated with (a) overall alexithymia scores, (b) Difficulty Describing Feelings, and (c) Externally Oriented Thinking, and was negatively associated with mind-mindedness. Individuals' mind-mindedness met the criteria for mediating the relation between attachment avoidance and Externally Oriented Thinking. Findings are discussed with reference to the importance of distinguishing ability versus propensity to employ mentalizing skills in theoretical understandings of alexithymia. © 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

Alexithymic individuals show normal physiological responses to emotion, suggesting that alexithymia is a deficit specifically in the cognitive processing of emotions (Lane, Sechrest, Riedel, Shapiro, & Kaszniak, 2000; Luminet, Vermeulen, Demaret, Taylor, & Bagby, 2006). The construct of alexithymia has been investigated using the twenty-item Toronto Alexithymia Scale TAS-20; (Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994; Bagby, Taylor, & Parker, 1994), and considerable work has gone into testing its reliability and validity (e.g., Parker, Taylor, & Bagby, 2003; Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 2003).

While the TAS-20 was designed to measure alexithymia as a single, multi-faceted construct, its items assess three separate sub-components: Difficulty Identifying Feelings, Difficulty Describing Feelings, and Externally Oriented Thinking (Taylor & Bagby, 2000). An individual scoring

high on Difficulty Identifying Feelings is likely to confuse emotions with physical bodily sensations when trying to communicate their feelings to others (Montebarocci, Codispoti, Baldaro, & Rossi, 2004). Taylor and Bagby (2000) noted that this confusion persists even when the individual displays potent emotional behaviors. High scores on Externally Oriented Thinking indicate a tendency to focus on external rather than internal experiences in every day life, both in personal thoughts and behaviors and in interactions with others (Parker, Bagby, Taylor, Endler, & Schmitz, 1993).

Despite recent empirical advances in assessing alexithymia, our understanding of this construct and its origins continues to be explored (Taylor & Bagby, 2004). Broad-based social factors have been found to relate to alexithymia. For example, in an undergraduate population, Mason, Tyson, Jones, and Potts (2005) reported relations between alexithymia, gender, and degree discipline. There was a higher prevalence of alexithymia in women than in men, and female science students scored more highly than female arts students.

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Individual differences in alexithymia have also begun to be explained with reference to more specific environmental, interpersonal, and developmental factors. In a large twin study, Jorgensen, Zachariae, Skytthe, and Kyvik (2007) reported that shared and non-shared environment made contributions to all three alexithymia factors, and scores for alexithymia in college students and their mothers have been found to be positively associated (Fukunishi & Paris, 2001). Alexithymic adults also report experiencing less emotional expression in their early family life and feeling less emotionally secure in childhood (Berenbaum & James, 1994). These findings suggest that early attachment relationships with caregivers may be important determinants of alexithymic traits.

### 1.1. Peer attachment and alexithymia

Although data are not yet available to test claims for a longitudinal relation between infant–caregiver attachment and alexithymia, research has addressed links between alexithymia and attachment style in adults' relationships with peers. Such investigations have predominantly employed tripartite models of peer attachment based on Hazan and Shaver's (1987) scheme, and found associations between secure attachment style and lower levels of alexithymia (Hexel, 2003; Montebanocci et al., 2004). Attachment style has been redefined more recently in terms of continuous measures of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance rather than traditional categories. For example, as well defining secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful attachment styles, Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) Relationship Questionnaire (RQ) yields continuous ratings for each of the four styles from which measures of attachment anxiety and avoidance can be calculated.

Attachment anxiety refers to the experience of dependence, worry, low self-worth, and fears of abandonment in relationships (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Attachment avoidance denotes a deactivation strategy shaped by negative expectations of relationships and fears of intimacy (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Thus, the four styles can be viewed as different combinations of high or low attachment anxiety and avoidance. Secure individuals score low on both attachment avoidance and anxiety, dismissing individuals score high on attachment avoidance but low on anxiety, those in the preoccupied group score low on avoidance but high on anxiety, and fearful individuals score highly on both avoidance and anxiety.

Cassidy's (1994) seminal review argued that attachment avoidance involves minimizing and repression of emotions, whereas attachment anxiety is associated with amplified emotional experiences. Thus, Mallinckrodt and Wei (2005) predicted alexithymia would be more prevalent in dismissing individuals due to their high attachment avoidance, low anxiety, and subsequent tendency actively to "repress conscious awareness of attachment feelings" (p. 360). However, contrary to this prediction, Mallinckrodt

and Wei found that high levels of alexithymia were associated with high attachment anxiety, indicative of preoccupied and fearful attachment styles. Wearden, Lambertson, Crook, and Walsh (2005) similarly reported that alexithymia was positively correlated with attachment anxiety, but was unrelated to scores on the dismissing scale. These results suggest that high attachment anxiety may not only result in amplified emotions, but also problems in understanding, expressing, and regulating such experiences.

### 1.2. Mind-mindedness

Although there is a growing body of evidence showing associations between peer attachment style and alexithymia, the mechanisms responsible for this relation remain obscure. In order to explore potential explanatory mechanisms, we drew on developmental research on caregivers' *mind-mindedness* (Meins, 1997) which has been found to be an important determinant of infant–caregiver attachment security (e.g., Meins, Fernyhough, Fradley, & Tuckey, 2001). Meins, Fernyhough, Russell, and Clark-Carter (1998) defined mind-mindedness in terms of a mother's tendency to focus on mental and emotional characteristics when given an open-ended invitation to describe her child. Mothers whose children were securely attached were more mind-minded when describing their children than were insecure-group mothers. We thus first set out to establish whether a similar link between attachment and mind-mindedness was observed when attachment was assessed in terms of young adults' peer attachment style and mind-mindedness was measured in the context of descriptions of a close friend. No study has yet investigated links between peer attachment style and the tendency to focus on cognitions, motivations, and feelings when describing a well-known person.

Mind-mindedness has been conceptualized as an index not of underlying competence in mentalizing abilities, but of individuals' proclivity to use their understanding of internal states to describe and explain people's behavior. For example, an investigation of mind-mindedness in 7–9-year-olds showed that mind-minded descriptions of a best friend or use of internal state language while narrating a wordless picture book were both unrelated to children's basic theory of mind abilities (Meins, Fernyhough, Johnson, & Lidstone, 2006). Interestingly, research on alexithymia suggests that difficulties associated with this trait are also best framed in terms of deficits in performance rather than competence. For example, highly alexithymic individuals have no deficits in their emotional lexicon (Luminet, Rime, Bagby, & Taylor, 2004) or theory of mind performance (Wastell & Taylor, 2002), implying that problems are specific to interpreting their own emotional responses and engagement.

We thus hypothesized that there would be a negative association between mind-mindedness and alexithymia. In particular, we expected a negative relation between mind-mindedness and scores for Externally Oriented Thinking

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