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Affection mediates the impact of alexithymia on relationships

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown alexithymia leading to a deficit in the ability of an individual to build and maintain relationships. Using the tenets of Affection Exchange Theory, the current study hypothesized a mediating role of trait affection in the relationship between alexithymia and both attachment behavior (specifically, anxious/avoidant and the need for intimacy) and an individual's self-reported number of close relationships. Participants ($N = 921$) filled out self-report measures of all variables, and the hypotheses were tested using a path analysis. Findings largely supported the predictions, with affection partially mediating the relationship between alexithymia and anxious/avoidant attachment and fully mediating the relationship between alexithymia and the need for intimacy and the number of close relationships. One sex interaction was also found, with the relationship between alexithymia and the need for intimacy becoming significantly stronger for women than for men. Implications and directions for future research are explored.

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1. Introduction

Sifneos (1973), after noticing several individuals who seemed unconcerned with emotional discourse during therapy, highlighted the construct of alexithymia, which simply means a lack of words for emotions. The term describes individuals who (1) are unable to understand and process emotion; (2) are unable to communicate their emotions to others; and (3) process events and behaviors externally, due to the inability to understand internal motivations (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997). These individuals are generally not expressive, showing little outside emotional communication, and are uncomfortable discussing feelings and cognitive mechanisms. Alexithymic individuals find it more difficult than non-alexithymic individuals to even make lexical decisions in communicating emotions (Suslow & Junghaans, 2002). One study found an inverse relationship in the amount of nonverbal expressiveness (e.g. yawning, self-grooming, fumbling, and closing the eyes) for individuals during a psychiatric interview and alexithymia, with a positive relationship between alexithymia and individual behaviors indicating avoidance, anxiety, and tension (Troisi et al., 1996). Other research has found a deficit in empathy in alexithymic individuals compared to non-alexithymics (e.g. Moriguchi et al., 2007).

Overall, over the previous few decades researchers have built a large body of work regarding the relationship between alexithymia and a host of psychological and physiological outcome variables (see review in Taylor and Bagby (2004)). Alexithymia, for example,

is positively related to eating disorders (Sureda, Valdés, Jódar, & de Pablo, 1999), substance abuse (Lumley, Stettner, & Wehmer, 1996), self-reports of pain (Kano, Hamaguchi, Itoh, Yanai, & Fukudo, 2007), and fibromyalgia (Van Middendorp et al., 2008). Alexithymia appears to thus impact the health of an individual in a multitude of avenues.

Researchers have also started to examine the relationship between alexithymia and interpersonal success. One of the larger areas of research in this field has been on the relationship between alexithymia and individual attachment traits. Several studies have examined the impact of alexithymia, including a tendency to have a fearful attachment style (Wearden, Lambertson, Crook, & Walsh, 2005) and testing higher on attachment anxiety and avoidance (Mallinckrodt & Wei, 2005). Montebanacci, Codispoti, Baldaro, and Rossi (2004) discovered a positive relationship between alexithymia and a host of attachment problems such as placing relationships as secondary and needing more approval from others. Overall, alexithymics appear to have greater difficulty forming relationships, prone to social isolation and lacking in trust (Kokkonen et al., 2001; Vanheule, Desmet, Meganck, & Bogaerts, 2007).

This deficit is apparent in the ability of alexithymic individuals to create and maintain meaningful attachments to others. Hesse and Floyd (2008), in a sample of undergraduate students, found alexithymia to be inversely related to the amount of affection one gave to their closest relationship and how close they were to that individual. Cooley (2006) reported that marital satisfaction was inversely associated with alexithymia. Brody (2003) found an inverse correlation between alexithymia and the frequency of

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vaginal intercourse for women (though not for men). All of these findings were supported by later research done by [Humphreys, Wood, and Parker \(2009\)](#), who discovered an inverse relationship between alexithymia and both relational and sexual satisfaction. Finally, [Hesse and Floyd \(in press\)](#) examined the real-time impact of alexithymia on initial interactions. Participants high and low in alexithymia underwent a 10-min initial interaction with a partner who had tested in the mid-range on alexithymia. After the interaction, partners reported being less physically and socially attracted to high-alexithymic than non-alexithymic participants ([Hesse & Floyd, in press](#)). Overall, the study pointed to an immediate impact of alexithymia in the ability to form attachments.

One potential reason for the biopsychosocial impact of alexithymia is the deficit for alexithymic individuals in their levels of trait affection (how much affection an individual generally gives and receives in their relationships). Affection has long been referred to in the literature as a fundamental human need ([Burgoon & Hale, 1984](#); [Schutz, 1966](#)). Recent research has strengthened that claim by discovering a link between communicating and receiving affection with a host of psychological and physiological benefits (for further review, see [Floyd \(2006a\)](#)). Psychologically, more affectionate individuals are less prone to stress and depression ([Floyd, 2002](#)), and loneliness ([Downs & Javidi, 1990](#)), and more emotionally stable ([Davies, Cummings, & Winter, 2004](#)) and happy ([Floyd et al., 2005](#)). Physiologically, affectionate behavior is inversely correlated with stress by-products including cortisol, blood pressure, blood glucose, and total cholesterol (e.g. [Floyd, 2006b](#); [Floyd, Hesse, & Haynes, 2007](#); [Floyd, Mikkelsen, Hesse, & Pauley, 2007](#)). Trait and state affection are positively related with oxytocin ([Floyd, Pauley, & Hesse, in press](#)). Relationally, affectionate experience leads to relationships that are closer, more satisfying, and more intimate ([Floyd, 2006a](#)). Affection appears to be central to the path towards greater wellness for the individual. We subsequently explain one potential reason for this conclusion.

2. Theory

Affection exchange theory (AET; [Floyd, 2006a](#)) is a neo-Darwinian theory whose foundational assumption is that affectionate communication is adaptive, allowing us to gain access to resources through the building and maintaining of relationships. Individuals better equipped to communicate affection are thus better able to succeed at relationships, thus leading to better indices of psychological and physiological wellness. While AET would claim that the need to communicate affection is innate, the theory also provides for the idea that the general capacity to communicate affection is variable, subject to both genetic and environmental factors between individuals. As adults, this difference in capacity to both give and receive affection is consequential. We conceive of alexithymia as one potential path to variation, with individuals higher in alexithymia less capable of experiencing affection ([Hesse & Floyd, 2008](#)). Indeed, previous research has found that affectionate experience partially mediates the relationship between alexithymia and nonverbal immediacy, happiness, depression, and relational closeness ([Hesse & Floyd, 2008](#)).

Although understanding these initial associations between alexithymia, affection, and relational outcomes is a good first step, there is much more to be examined. The combination of alexithymia and affection could potentially impact a plethora of variables relating to relationship dynamics or relationship success. To truly understand the pathways between which affection influences alexithymia on relationships, we need to dig deeper into the core of relationships than previous efforts have done. We perceive of variables like attachment and the total number of close relationships as central to an individual's general ability to succeed in building

and maintaining relationships. Previous research has shown that individual attachment security can vary depending on relationship contexts such as amount and satisfaction of sex ([Little, McNulty, & Russell, 2010](#)). Understanding how alexithymia and affection can also combine to influence these variables will give us a clearer picture of why alexithymia leads not only to relational costs, but to the psychological and physiological deficits expounded above. This also continues the call for research by [Humphreys et al. \(2009\)](#), who stated that in order to completely understand the impact of alexithymia on relationships, one must look for potential mediators among other indicators of relational quality.

Thus, the current study seeks to replicate and extend current research by examining whether levels of trait affectionate experience is a path by which alexithymia impacts relationships. This leads to two specific hypotheses:

H1: Trait affectionate experience will mediate the relationship between alexithymia and attachment behaviors.

H2: Trait affectionate experience will mediate the relationship between alexithymia and an individual's overall number of close relationships.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants ($N = 921$) consisted of 332 men and 583 women (6 declined to report their sex) ranging in age from 17 to 50 ($M = 20.77$, $SD = 3.02$). Most of the sample identified as Caucasian (78.9%), with 11% identifying as Hispanic, 5.6% as African-American, 6.7% as Asian, .9% as Native American, and 3.9% as Other (these percentages sum to >100 because several participants identified with more than one ethnic group).

3.2. Procedure

Participants were recruited from undergraduate courses in a large university in the southwestern United States and told they were taking part in a study on emotional competence and relationships. All participants filled out and submitted the survey online, which took approximately 20 min to complete. Participants were then given extra credit for their involvement.

3.3. Measures

Participants completed the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20; [Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994](#)), a measure of trait affection both given and received ([Floyd, 2002](#)), measures of attachment ([Guerrero, 1996](#)), and a measure assessing their number of close relationships.

3.3.1. Toronto alexithymia scale (TAS-20)

The TAS-20 is a self-report measure of alexithymia that is divided into three sections: Individual difficulty identifying feelings, individual difficulty describing feelings, and a tendency toward externally-oriented thinking. The TAS-20 is the most widely used measure of alexithymia, and has been validated in numerous studies across several cultures (for review, see [Bagby and Taylor \(1997\)](#), [Taylor and Bagby, \(2004\)](#)). The TAS-20 continued to show a high measure of reliability in the present study ($\alpha = .85$).

3.3.2. Trait experience of affection

Trait experience of affection was measured by combining two scales, the 10-item Trait Affection Scale-Given (TAS-G; [Floyd, 2002](#)), and the 6-item Trait Affection Scale-Received (TAS-R; [Floyd,](#)

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