



The relationship between attachment styles and alexithymia: Mediating role of defense mechanisms[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the mediating role of ego defense mechanisms on the relationship between attachment styles and alexithymia. Four hundred and forty-three Iranian high school students (213 boys, 230 girls) participated in this study. Participants completed Defense Styles Questionnaire (DSQ-40), Adult Attachment Inventory (AAI), and Farsi version of the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (FTAS-20). Results showed a significant negative correlation between secure attachment style and alexithymia, while avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles showed significant positive associations with alexithymia. Regression analysis indicated that defense mechanisms have a mediating role between attachment styles and alexithymia. It can be concluded that a mediation role of ego defense mechanisms on the relationship between attachment styles and alexithymia was partial.

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1. Introduction

Alexithymia refers to deficit in the ability to recognize and express of emotions, use of concrete speech and thoughts related to external events, and a paucity of fantasy life. It has four main characteristics: (a) disability in distinguishing emotions; (b) disability in describing feelings; (c) constricted imagination; and (d) concrete cognitive style (e.g., Chambers et al., 2009; Kreibig, 2010). It is also described as a difficulty in emotion regulation (e.g., Bermond et al., 2010; Stasiewicz et al., 2012) which is the complex process of interaction between neurophysiological, motor-expressive, and cognitive-experiential systems of emotions. Because of this, alexithymia elicits in different forms such as disabilities to conceptualization of affect, distinguish among emotions, experience of emotions consciously and describe the stress which is displaced to body dysfunctions (Nemiah, 2000). Alexithymia has association with a variety of psychological disorders and physical illnesses (Evren et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important to know more about the developmental background of alexithymia.

Studies show that childhood experiences with caregivers who do not express their emotions, and use insufficient strategies of responding to children's negative emotions, have a strong effect in emotion regulation in adulthood (e.g., Carrère and Bowie, 2012;

Roque and Veríssimo, 2011). These findings imply that the ability to recognize, describe and regulate emotions is related to child's relationships with attachment figures.

Research on the relationship between attachment styles and alexithymia shows that alexithymia features are more common in the insecure attachment styles (Besharat, 2010). Family studies of alexithymia show that children who grow up in an emotionally and physically insecure environments which prevent them from expressing emotions do not learn successful coping skills for their emotions and consequently feel discomfort when they do experience emotions (e.g., Besharat, 2010). These difficulties, in addition to lack of appropriate patterns for expressing emotions, may lead to anxiety and ambivalence toward expressing emotions (e.g., Karukivi et al., 2011). Individuals with poor maternal care experiences show alexithymia characteristics, especially difficulties in expressing emotions (e.g., Karukivi et al., 2011). Insecure attachment may cause failure in learning how to feel and may pave the way for alexithymia (Wearden et al., 2005). Insecure feelings in attachment relationships anticipate defect and inadequacy in the identification of and expressing of emotions (Dewitte et al., 2010).

Despite these studies, we do not fully understand the mechanisms via which attachment style can affect emotion regulation. Therefore, it is important to assess the variables which have a mediator effect on this relationship. Freud (1923) believed that ego defense style and frequency of using defense mechanisms are the mains factor in the understanding of personality and psychopathology. Mickelson et al. (1997) noted that psychological defense styles may serve as moderators or mediators of early negative relationships and adult psychopathology. Therefore, it can be predicted that defense mechanisms may play an important

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role in the development of alexithymia when attachment style is insecure.

Defense mechanisms are automatic self regulating processes which reduce cognitive discrepancies and minimize sudden changes in external and internal reality by distorting the perception of threatening events (Vaillant, 1994). Andrews et al. (1993) categorized three defense styles based on twenty defense mechanisms suggested by Vaillant (1976). These are named “mature”, “neurotic” and “immature”. The mature defense style represents normal and adaptive methods of coping whereas the immature and neurotic styles are dysfunctional and maladaptive coping strategies. Defense mechanisms are associated with physical and psychological consequences (Vaillant, 2000) and predict several kinds of psychopathology in adolescents (Besharat and Shahidi, 2011; Kwon and Olson, 2007).

Several studies show that development of defense mechanisms is affected by attachment style (Besharat et al., 2001; McMahon et al., 2005). The way people cope with stressful conditions is influenced by their defense styles, which in turn is determined by their attachment styles (Kobak and Sceery, 1988). On the other hand, it was shown that dysfunctional defense mechanisms are associated with disabilities in recognizing and expressing of affects (Besharat, 2010; Besharat and Shahidi, 2011).

The present study was aimed to examine the mediating role of defense mechanisms on the relationship between attachment styles and alexithymia. By considering theoretical and research findings in this field, there are three hypotheses for this study: (1) there is a negative relationship between secure attachment style and alexithymia; (2) there is a positive relationship between insecure attachment styles and alexithymia; (3) defense mechanisms have a mediating role on the relationship between attachment styles and alexithymia.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants included in this study were high school students in Tehran, Iran. Four hundred and seventy students from different academic disciplines in the humanities, experimental sciences and mathematics were included in this study. After the description of the research objectives and the students' consent, Defense Style Questionnaire (DSQ-40; Andrews et al., 1993), Adult Attachment Inventory (AAI; Besharat, 2011), and Farsi version of the Toronto Alexithymia Scale-20 (TAS-20; Bagby et al., 1994) were performed. To encourage students and increase the accuracy of the test answering, participants were asked to write their name and address in order to distribute the results of the study. The average time required to complete the questionnaire was 30 min. In order to control order effects and fatigue in students, scales were presented in different sequences. Twenty seven students were excluded from statistical analysis due to incomplete responses. Hence, 443 students completed the whole study that consisted of 230 girls and 213 boys. The average age of the students was 17.20 (SD = .84, age range: 16–19 years). The average age of boys was 17.30 (SD = .81, age range: 16–19 years), and the average age of girls was 17.13 (SD = .86, age range: 16–19 years).

3. Measures

DSQ-40: The DSQ-40 (Andrews et al., 1993) is a 40-item self-report questionnaire. Items are rated on a nine-point scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 9 (completely agree) and measure three categories of defense mechanisms including mature, neurotic, and immature styles. The mature defense style includes mechanisms of sublimation, humor, anticipation, and suppression. The neurotic

defense style includes mechanisms of undoing, pseudoaltruism, idealization, and reaction formation. The immature defense style includes mechanisms of projection, passive aggression, acting out, isolation, devaluation, autistic fantasy, denial, displacement, dissociation, splitting, rationalization, and somatization. Each of the defense mechanisms has two items on the DSQ-40. The DSQ-40 has demonstrated good psychometric properties (Andrews et al., 1993). Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the Farsi version of the DSQ-40 ranged from .83 to .94 for mature defense style, .81 to .92 for neurotic defense style, and .79 to .91 for immature defense style (Besharat, 2007a). Test–retest reliability in a sample of 107 patients and 248 normal individuals were calculated in two occasions over a 2–6 week period. Correlation coefficients ranged from .73 to .87 for mature defense style, .71–.84 for neurotic defense style, and .69–.78 for immature defense style (Besharat, 2007a). All correlation coefficients were significant at $p < .001$. These coefficients are indicative of adequate test–retest reliability of the Farsi version of DSQ-40.

AAI: The AAI is a 15-item inventory derived from the Attachment Style Questionnaire (Hazan and Shaver, 1987), the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991), and the Attachment History Questionnaire (Crowell et al., 1999) and validated for Iranian populations (Besharat, 2011). The AAI measures three attachment styles including secure, avoidant, and ambivalent on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very little) to 5 (very much). Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the AAI were .85, .84, and .85 for secure, avoidant, and ambivalent attachment styles, respectively. Test–retest reliability in a sample of 300 participants was calculated in two occasions over a 4 week period. Correlation coefficients were .87, .83, and .84 for secure, avoidant, and ambivalent attachment styles, respectively. All correlation coefficients were significant at $p < .001$ (Besharat, 2011). These coefficients are indicative of adequate test–retest reliability of the AAI. Construct validity of the AAI was confirmed by factor analysis that identified three factors named secure, avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles (Besharat, 2011).

FTAS-20: The FTAS-20 is a Farsi version of The Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20; Bagby et al., 1994) validated for Iranian populations (Besharat, 2007b). The FTAS-20 measures three components of alexithymia including difficulty identifying feelings, difficulty describing feelings, and externally oriented thinking on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The TAS-20 has demonstrated good psychometric properties (e.g., Parker et al., 2003; Thorberg et al., 2010). Adequate psychometric properties of the scale have yielded results for Iranian populations (Besharat, 2007b). Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the FTAS-20 were .85, .82, .75, and .72 for overall alexithymia score and subscales of difficulty identifying feelings, difficulty describing feelings, and externally oriented thinking, respectively. Test–retest reliability in a sample of 67 participants was calculated on two occasions over a 4 week period. Correlation coefficients ranged from .80 to .87 for the total and subscales scores. All correlation coefficients were significant at $p < .001$ (Besharat, 2007b).

4. Results

Table 1 shows mean and standard deviations for alexithymia, defense styles and attachment styles scores for boys, girls, and the total sample.

Pearson correlation coefficients between defense styles, attachment styles, and alexithymia scores are shown in Table 2. As can be seen from the table, secure and insecure attachment styles showed significant negative and positive correlations with alexithymia, respectively. These results confirm the first two hypotheses.

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