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Alexithymia and mental imagery

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Abstract

One of the defining characteristics of alexithymic patients is their reduced ability to use mental images. In the present study, imaging capacity was evaluated in a total of 69 alexithymic subjects and 64 non-alexithymic subjects (all university students). Alexithymic subjects showed lower imaging capacity than non-alexithymic subjects. New approaches for investigation of the relationship between alexithymia and imagery vividness are proposed. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Alexithymia is a personality construct that may be a potential vulnerability factor for a number of psychiatric disorders and physical illnesses. The term alexithymia (Sifneos, 1973) refers to a group of symptoms, namely (a) difficulty in identifying and describing emotions, (b) reduced capacity to use images, giving rise to poor mental imagery and (c) a cognitive style denominated ‘pensée opératoire’ (operational thinking). Though not included as a diagnostic category in either DSM-III-R or DSM-IV, alexithymia may occur within a wide range of psychiatric disorders (Fernández-Montalvo & Yárnoz, 1994). It can be considered as a personality construct with different degrees, normally distributed in the general population,

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reflecting a deficit in the capacity for emotional regulation and constituting a risk factor for organic and psychiatric disorders (Taylor, 1994; Taylor, Bagby & Parker, 1997).

Alexithymia is related to mental imaging capacity in several ways. Lang (1979) states that there are individual differences in the capacity to evoke mental images, and that a lack of imaginative ability may constitute a defining part of the cognitive style of various pathological types, namely the psychosomatic and alexithymic types. Mental images play an important role in emotional processes and are closely involved in emotional regulation (Izard & Kobak, 1991; Lang, 1984; Lang, Greenwald, Bradley & Hamm, 1993). Sifneos (1988) states that the imaginative deficit of alexithymic subjects is manifested in “an inability to associate one’s visual images, fantasies, and thoughts with a specific emotional state”. Krystal (1979) states that in alexithymic subjects “imagination related to drive fulfilment is limited”.

Friedlander, Lumley, Farchione and Doyal (1997) compared 42 alexithymic subjects with 42 sex- and race-matched non-alexithymic subjects as regards physiological and subjective responses to an autogenic relaxation exercise and three different laboratory stressors. The groups did not differ in the degree to which they relaxed, but alexithymic subjects reported less enjoyment of, less involvement in and poorer imagery during relaxation.

Most researchers have found that alexithymic subjects dream little or not at all, that the content of their dreams is limited and realist and that daydreaming and fantasy are infrequent (Pédinielli, 1992). Image techniques are frequently used in the treatment of alexithymia (Wheeler & Broad, 1994).

Some previous studies have likewise found that sex has no significant effect, but most have found that women tend to have better imaging capacity (see Campos and Sueiro, (1993) for a review) and to use mental images more frequently (Campos, González & Pérez, 1998; González, 1998). On certain tasks involving image rotation, however, women may perform worse, or no better, than men (Campos & Cofán, 1986).

In previous studies, the imaginative capacity of alexithymic subjects has been measured by indirect techniques (dream evaluation, image–thought association, imagery during relaxation, etc.) and has not been measured directly. In the present study, we aimed to evaluate whether image vividness differs between alexithymic and non-alexithymic subjects and between women and men.

2. Method

2.1. Subjects

The initial sample comprised 1172 students of economics, law, literature, foreign languages, sports studies or psychology at the University of Paris X Nanterre (France). Age ranged between 18 and 28 years. Following the recommendations of Taylor, Parker, Bagby and Acklin (1992), subjects were classed as alexithymic if they scored 61 or more on the TAS-20 scale (see Section 2.2) and as non-alexithymic if they scored 51 or less. The proportion of alexithymic students in the initial sample was 10.66% (for a review of the incidence of alexithymia in the general population, see Sivak and Wiater (1997)). This proportion is similar to those obtained

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