



# Alexithymia and attachment style in relation to locus of control

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## Abstract

This study examines the relationship between internal–external locus of control, alexithymia, and adult attachment style. A population of 220 undergraduate medical students at the University of Vienna completed, in a single session, the Questionnaire of Competence and Control Orientation (FKK), the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), and the Adult Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ). Results from this study reveal that participants with an internal locus of control show lower scores on alexithymia and report more confidence, which is associated with secure attachment style. Overall this study finds a significant association between low alexithymia and secure attachment style controlling the influence of the locus of control.

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*Keywords:* Alexithymia; Attachment; Attachment style; Locus of control

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this study was to test for indications of an association between alexithymia, adult attachment style, and locus of control. So far, there has been no quantitative study investigating individuals' underlying beliefs about their ability to shape their own life trajectory in connection with their ability to recognise and verbalise emotional feelings, and their self-reported attachment style.

The concept of Internality vs. Externality (locus of control) is based on the theory of social learning (Rotter, 1954, 1966). This theory states that individuals hold generalised expectancies, which are based on past experiences. Internal locus of control points out that in different life situations the ability to act and make a difference exists, and an attitude that a certain amount of control over life

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and immediate environment is present. External locus of control means that important life events are considered as being dependent on other people, luck, good or bad, or coincidence.

The concept of alexithymia, proposed originally by Sifneos and Nemiah in the early 1970s, is seen as a disturbance in affective and cognitive functions, with a lack of the ability to transfer affective arousal of experience into feelings and fantasies that symbolise and express emotions. Endless description of physical symptoms instead of emotions, concrete speech and thought closely tied to external events, as well as paucity of fantasy life are present (Bagby & Taylor, 1997). Alexithymia is considered an important risk factor for psychological and physical disease (Bach & Bach, 1995), and greater occurrence of alexithymia could be found in people with low self-esteem (Yelsma, 1995). Research in the medical field found that idiopathic spasmodic torticollis patients scored significantly higher on the measure of alexithymia and insecure attachment style than a non-clinical group (Scheidt et al., 1999). Also, correlations could be found between mothers' low care and alexithymia in Japanese college students (Fukunishi et al., 1997). Kraemer and Loader (1995) assume that an insecure attachment may lead to a failure to learn how to feel, setting the stage for an alexithymic personality.

Attachment theory is based on the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth and focuses on an innate attachment behavioral system (Ainsworth, Bell, & Strayton, 1974). Attachment is also seen as the first and most crucial relationship through which human beings learn to organise meaning (Marris, 1991). Attachment researchers have classified different attachment styles that are evident even in young children. Secure attachment is the model for a healthy upbringing, which is associated with the caregiver's sensitivity and responsiveness towards the child. Conversely, insecure patterns of attachment suggest that elements of sensitivity, reliability, or trust are missing in the relationship between caregiver and child (Grossmann & Grossmann, 1991). Most theorists maintain that while there is only one secure attachment style, there are numerous styles of insecure attachment (Berman and Sperling, 1994). Bowlby (1982) pointed out that encouraging, supportive and cooperative caregivers who enable the child to explore his/her environment with confidence and to deal with it effectively, promote his/her sense of competence. Personality becomes increasingly structured to operate in moderately controlled and resilient ways (Bowlby, 1982). Research indicates that adults with a secure attachment style, like secure children are more emotionally positive than those with insecure attachment style (Collins & Read, 1990). Some researchers assume that early attachment styles will remain stable and serve to confirm an individual's expectations about the social world and important others (Goldberg, 1991; Rothbard & Shaver, 1994; Rutter, 1995). It is also assumed that the way in which affect, cognition, and attachment behaviour are integrated and mentally represented during formative years has a major influence on the organisation of the personality and accounts for important individual differences in adult life (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997).

On the basis of previous theoretical considerations and of research findings, it was hypothesised that

1. Participants with an internal locus of control score lower on alexithymia than participants with an external locus of control.
2. Participants with an internal locus of control display a secure attachment style, while those with a tendency towards an external locus of control an insecure attachment style.
3. Furthermore, this study sought to examine the possible association between alexithymia and attachment style considering locus of control as a mediating construct.

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