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ALEXITHYMIA AND REPRESSION: THE ROLE OF DEFENSIVENESS AND TRAIT ANXIETY

Lynn B. Myers*

MRC Social and Community Psychiatry Unit, Institute of Psychiatry, London, England

Summary—The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between alexithymia, repressive coping, defensiveness and trait anxiety. The Marlowe–Crowne scale (MC) and the Bendig version of the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale (MAS) were used to select repressor and control group subjects, who subsequently completed the revised Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20). Results showed that repressors (high MC, low MAS) scored significantly lower on the TAS-20 than all other subjects, including a defensive high anxious group (high MC, high MAS) and a low-anxious group (low MC, low MAS). The results suggest that repressors' low alexithymia score was due to the combination of defensiveness and anxiety and not high defensiveness or low trait anxiety alone. Possible reasons for repressors' low alexithymia score are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

There is a well documented relationship between expressing emotions and positive health outcomes (e.g. Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Hughes & O'Heeron, 1987; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser & Glaser, 1988). In addition, a growing body of evidence indicates that alexithymia and repression, two personality styles which involve problems of expressing emotions, are related to physical illness (see Schwartz, 1990; Taylor, 1994 for reviews).

Alexithymia is a personality style derived from clinical observations of patients with psychosomatic diseases (Krystal, 1968; Nemiah & Sifneos, 1970a). Alexithymic individuals show reduced or absent symbolic thinking as well as difficulties in recognising and describing their own feelings and difficulties discriminating between bodily sensations and emotional states (see Krystal, 1979; Taylor, 1984 for detailed descriptions).

In a recent formulation of repression, Weinberger, Schwartz and Davidson (1979) identified a group of individuals who possess a repressive coping style. Repressors score high on measures of defensiveness such as the Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability Scale (MC, Crowne & Marlowe, 1964) and low on measures of trait anxiety such as the short version of the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale (MAS, Bendig, 1956). Experimentally, repressors are usually compared with control Ss who possess different combinations of trait anxiety and defensiveness, i.e. *low anxious* (low anxiety–low defensiveness), *high anxious* (high anxiety–low defensiveness), and *defensive high anxious* (high anxiety–high defensiveness) Ss. Typically, repressors under stressful conditions exhibit a dissociation between physiological and subjective measures of distress, showing high levels of physiological reactivity whilst reporting low levels of distress (e.g. Gudjonsson, 1981; Weinberger et al., 1979) and they tend to avoid negative affect (Weinberger, 1990).

It has been proposed that alexithymia and repression are similar constructs (Nemiah & Sifneos, 1970b; Nemiah, Freyberger & Sifneos, 1976; Weinberger & Schwartz, 1990) or alternatively that alexithymia may be an aspect of repressive coping (Bonanno & Singer, 1990). However, even though some research suggests that repressors exhibit alexithymic features (Weinberger & Schwartz, 1990), other research suggests that they do not (Martin & Pihl, 1986). Recently, Newton and Contrada (1994) presented evidence that alexithymia and repressive coping may be inversely related. In this study, repressors, low anxious and high anxious Ss were required to complete a measure of alexithymia (the Toronto Alexithymia scale, TAS; Taylor, Ryan & Bagby, 1985). Repressor and low anxious Ss scored significantly lower on the TAS than high anxious Ss. During a stressful laboratory task, low alexithymics showed the typical repressive pattern, reporting low distress but being physiologically

*Address for correspondence: Department of Psychology, Royal Holloway, Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX, England. Fax: 01784 434347.

reactive whereas high alexithymics behaved similarly to high anxious Ss. However, this study did not include a defensive high anxious group. Therefore, as noted by the authors, it is not clear whether defensiveness or trait anxiety scores alone, rather than the interaction of the two, may have been responsible for the different responses of the repressor and high anxious groups. For example, the low TAS scores found in both repressors and low anxious Ss may have reflected the importance of low trait anxiety scores, as the TAS is positively correlated with measures of trait anxiety (Parker, Bagby & Taylor, 1989; Taylor, Parker & Bagby, 1990).

The present study examined the relationship between alexithymia, repressive coping, and other combinations of defensiveness and trait anxiety. Unlike in previous research, a defensive high anxious group was included. In addition, a group who scored in the normal range on trait anxiety and defensiveness was added to ascertain how non-extreme scorers perform on the TAS-20 compared to the four extreme-scoring groups identified by Weinberger *et al.* (1979).

METHOD

Subjects

Ss were females from adult education classes, aged between 18 and 58 yr (mean age 35.14 yr), chosen from an initial pool of 160. Repressors and four control groups were selected on the basis of their scores on the MAS and the MC. Quartile splits were used to identify the four extreme groups. Repressors scored 5 or under on the MAS and 17 or over on the MC ($N = 20$, Mean MAS = 2.70, Mean MC = 21.45); low anxious Ss scored 5 or under on the MAS and 10 or under on the MC (N = 16, Mean MAS = 3.75, Mean MC = 8.13); high anxious Ss scored 13 or over on the MAS and 10 or under on the MC ($N = 16$, Mean MAS = 15.18, Mean MC = 7.13); defensive high anxious subjects scored 13 or over on the MAS and 17 or over on the MC ($N = 13$, Mean MAS = 13.30, Mean MC = 19.23); and a non-extreme group scored between 10 and 12 on the MAS and between 8 and 13 on the MC ($N = 15$, Mean MAS = 11.13, Mean MC = 10.46).

Measures

Ss completed the TAS-20 (Taylor, Bagby & Parker, 1992; Bagby, Parker & Taylor, 1993a) a revised measure which was developed by the original authors in order to improve the psychometric properties of the TAS. This 20-item measure consists of statements with which Ss are instructed to rate how much they agree or disagree on a Likert scale. The TAS-20 has a three factor structure: (F1): difficulty identifying feelings and distinguishing them from the bodily sensations that accompany emotions; (F2): difficulty describing feelings to others; and (F3): externally-orientated thinking. There is evidence of good reliability and convergent and discriminant validity (Taylor *et al.*, 1992; Bagby *et al.*, 1993a; Bagby, Parker & Taylor, 1993b).

In the present study Cronbach's alpha was 0.85 for the overall scale. When this was broken down into the three factors, F1 was 0.86, F2 was 0.78 and F3 was 0.61. These figures are comparable with previous studies using the TAS-20 (Bagby *et al.*, 1993a). Ss completed the TAS-20 with a number of other questionnaires.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Group differences in the means were tested for using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Newman–Keuls tests were used for all *post hoc* comparisons, with significance levels set at $P < 0.05$.

Table 1 shows means and standard deviations for TAS-20 scores. There was a significant main effect for group, with repressors scoring significantly lower than all four control groups on the TAS-20. In addition, low anxious Ss scored significantly lower than defensive high anxious Ss.

Analyses were then carried out on the three factors individually. There were significant main effects for group for all three factors. For F1 and F2, repressors scored significantly lower than all four control groups. For F3, repressors scored significantly lower than low anxious and defensive high anxious Ss only. In addition, defensive high anxious Ss scored significantly higher than high anxious and non-extreme groups.

Consistent with Newton and Contrada (1994), repressors appear to be low alexithymic individuals.