



# The relationship between emotional intelligence and alexithymia

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Received 24 June 1999; received in revised form 18 November 1999; accepted 24 January 2000

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## Abstract

In this study, the empirical association between the apparently similar constructs of emotional intelligence and alexithymia was examined using latent variable analysis in a large community sample of adults ( $N=734$ ). The Twenty-Item Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20) and the BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i) were used to assess alexithymia and emotional intelligence. Results revealed that although the constructs are independent, they overlap considerably and are strongly and inversely related. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Alexithymia; Emotional intelligence; Structural equation modelling

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## 1. Introduction

Introduced by Salovey and Mayer (1989/1990) a decade ago, the construct of emotional intelligence is generating considerable public interest, mostly due to the popularization of the concept by Goleman (1995, 1998). A conceptually similar construct is alexithymia. Although less well known in the popular press, the alexithymia construct was introduced almost 30 years ago (Nemiah and Sifneos, 1970; Nemiah, Freyberger & Sifneos, 1976) and has generated a far greater amount of empirical research than has the emotional intelligence construct (Taylor, Bagby & Parker, 1997). A comparison of the definitions of emotional intelligence and alexithymia suggests that the two constructs are closely related.

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Derived from the broader construct of social intelligence, emotional intelligence was defined originally by Salovey and Mayer (1989/1990) as “the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (p. 189). This definition encompasses two subtypes of personal intelligence described by Gardner (1983) — intrapersonal intelligence (the ability to access one’s own feeling life) and interpersonal intelligence (the ability to read the moods, intentions, and desires of others). Bar-On (1996, 1997), who has worked extensively on developing a comprehensive inventory for assessing emotional intelligence since 1980, employs a much broader definition of the construct, which includes adaptive capacities and abilities to control impulses and cope with stress, as well as intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence.

Whereas the emotional intelligence construct emerged from an integration of an array of research findings on how people appraise, communicate, and use emotion (Salovey & Mayer, 1989/1990), the alexithymia construct, formulated by Nemiah et al. (1976), arose primarily from a cluster of cognitive and affective characteristics that had been observed in clinical situations, initially among patients with so-called ‘classical’ psychosomatic diseases (Nemiah & Sifneos, 1970; Ruesch, 1948), and later among patients with substance use disorders (Krystal & Raskin, 1970), posttraumatic stress disorders (Krystal, 1968), and eating disorders (Bruch, 1973).

The salient features of the alexithymia construct include difficulties in identifying and describing subjective feelings, a limited imaginal capacity, and an externally oriented style of thinking (Taylor, Bagby & Parker, 1991, 1997). Although difficulty in monitoring the feelings and emotions of other people is not part of the definition, empirical studies have shown that individuals with high degrees of alexithymia experience difficulties in accurately identifying emotions in the facial expressions of others (Lane et al., 1996; Parker, Taylor & Bagby, 1993b); and clinicians report that alexithymic individuals manifest a limited capacity for empathizing with the emotional states of others (Krystal, 1979; McDougall, 1989; Taylor, 1987). In addition, there is empirical evidence that alexithymia is associated with difficulties in discriminating among different emotional states (Bagby, Parker, Taylor & Acklin, 1993), and with a limited ability to think about and use emotions to cope with stressful situations (Parker, Taylor & Bagby, 1998; Schaffer, 1993).

Although Salovey and Mayer (1989/1990; Salovey, Hsee, and Mayer, 1993) acknowledge an overlap of the emotional intelligence and alexithymia constructs, they have made little attempt to evaluate empirically the relationships between the two constructs. One possible explanation for this is that these investigators have yet to introduce a standardised method for assessing emotional intelligence. Salovey and Mayer’s (1989/1990) definition of the construct was operationalized recently, however, by Schutte et al. (1998), who developed and validated a 33-item self-report scale. In a mixed, but rather small, university student and community sample ( $N = 25$ ), this scale correlated strongly and negatively ( $r = -0.65$ ) with the 26-item Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS; Taylor, Ryan & Bagby, 1985).

In a more recent study, Davies, Stankov and Roberts (1998) used the three factor scales of the Twenty-Item Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20; Bagby, Parker & Taylor, 1994a) to assess the appraisal and expression of emotions in the self and the recognition of emotions in others. In a second-order factor analysis, which included a number of different scales related to emotional intelligence, the TAS-20 factor scales loaded significantly on factors pertaining to ‘emotional

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