**ALEXITHYMIA, LONELINESS AND INTERPERSONAL PROBLEMS IN YOUNG ADULTS**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Objective:** The study was to investigate the relationship among alexithymia, loneliness and interpersonal problems in young adults. It was hypothesized that alexithymia referring to difficulties in identifying and verbally describing feelings would predict loneliness and interpersonal problems.

**Materials and Methods:** A sample of 240 students was taken from different government and private universities of Lahore city. Sample included both men (n = 120) and women (n = 120) with in the age range of 18 to 25 years (*M*=21.38, *SD*=1.88). Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), University of California-Los Angeles Loneliness Scale – Version 3 (UCLA) and Inventory of Interpersonal Problems-Short Circumplex (IIP-SC) was used to assess alexithymia loneliness and interpersonal problems respectively.

**Conclusion:** The results indicated that there was a significant positive correlation among alexithymia, loneliness and interpersonal problems and alexithymia predicted loneliness and interpersonal problems. The results can be useful in designing interventional programs, strategies for treatment or counseling based on regulation of emotions.

**Key words:** Alexithymia, loneliness, interpersonal problems

**INTRODUCTION**

Young adults make up one quarter of the world's population. They are the ones, determining social and economic development, challenging social values and norms, and building the foundation of the world's future. Population Reference Bureau reported the estimated population of young adults as 25% worldwide (The World’s Youth, 2013).

Changes that occur in young adulthood includes development of more complex thinking, as teens progress into young adulthood, they are able to hold and manipulate not only single abstractions, but also clusters of abstractions accompanied by enough maturity to organize abstract thoughts. Mutuality in relationships, young adults form relationships with peers based on observing that they care about the same things and loyalties to institutions based on fact that they share the same values. They can also understand constructive criticism developing a more socializable orientation. Emotional regulation, young adults acquire a significantly greater capacity for integration of thought and emotion. They can better weigh immediate rewards against future consequences as their emotional intensity and sensation-seeking heightened since puberty. Risk-taking and decision-making, with the increase in capacity for thinking about future consequences and regulating the emotions, young adults have an easier time modulating risk-taking and making decisions about the future, including choices about health, relationships, education, and careers (Simpson, 2008).

In the early 1970s, the term alexithymia was coined after Nemiah and Sifneos (1970) conducted systematic investigations on patients with psychosomatic diseases and observed marked difficulty in describing subjective feelings, poor fantasy life, and a cognitive style that is factual, practical, and externally orientated in them.

Alexithymia is not a diagnosable clinical disorder. But the trend was to study it in relation to clinical disorders which showed that it prevailed in patients with a number of disorders. Studies have supported the view that alexithymia is a stable personality trait rather than a state-dependent phenomenon linked to depression or to clinical status (Luminet, Bagby, & Taylor, 2001). Recently, the interest has been shifted and researchers started studying it in general population similarly, the present study focused on young adults studying in academic institutions.

Loneliness is subjective psychological discomfort that occurs when one’s social relationships are perceived as being less satisfying than what is desired. It significantly affects youth in many perspectives. Chronically lonely youth experienced academic difficulty, both in terms of academic progress and exit exam success (Benner, 2011).

Young adulthood is a unique transitional phase of life accompanied by developmental changes that creates a different feeling of loneliness. Many factors that lead to loneliness in adolescence are intellectual and physiological changes and the quest to challenge old assumptions about society and life. Young adults might start to think and question their own identity and society. While addressing to these uncertainties, individuals drenched in complexities of emotional regulation, might experience a feeling of loneliness in the big and external world because they want to find specialty for self-characters (Chen, 2009).

Interpersonal relationships not only shape social behaviors but also affect an individual's sense of self and others (Alden & Taylor, 2004). The importance of interpersonal relationships is also pointed out by studies that have been applied in the last half of the 20th century, when most researchers reported that the number and quality of interpersonal relations are at the basis of a high quality life (Campbell, 2010).

An adult’s relationship with friends includes concepts such as intimacy, loyalty, and shared values or attitudes which are created from early adolescence (Williams & Berndt, 1990). Emotionally intelligent students are skilled in interpersonal communication (Nelson and Low, 2003). These psychological changes that occur in adolescence are consistent with the cognitive changes in early adolescence whereby adolescents master the ability to think about abstract concepts, such as intimacy and loyalty. On the other hand, the individuals struggling with emotional issues experiences interpersonal difficulties diversely which lead to the feelings of

Alexithymia is associated with poor socio-affective skills. Some authors hypothesized that alexithymic people have difficulties interacting and dealing with their social environment and showed patterns of cold and distant social functioning and detachment from others. Later, alexithymia was described as a sub-clinical personality trait associated with inability to identify and describe emotion in self (Vanheule, Desmet, Meganck, & Bogaerts, 2007).Researchers have associated loneliness with poor emotional knowledge showing that deficit to identify and understand one’s own emotions may affect interpersonal relationships and result in loneliness (Qualter, Quinton, Wagner, & Brown, 2009).

Alexithymia leads to disturbance in the regulation of affect. The perception and production of facial expressions play an important role in nonverbal communication, which substantially modulates and codetermines social interaction and interpersonal relationships (Stone & Nielson, 2001 as cited in Spitzer, Jürges, Barnow, Grabe, & Freyberger, 2005).

Relationship between alexithymia and loneliness is rarely explored. Therefore there is not much evidence about their interaction. Perhaps evidence linking loneliness and alexithymia reveals that highly alexithymic individuals report to have poor social support networks, lesser close relationships,and feeling disconnected from others (Hesse & Floyd,2011). Loneliness and intimate communication are the two potential pathways by which alexithymia may contribute to relationship problems (Frye-Cox & Hesse, 2013). Hence, the present study was devised to assess how alexithymia relates to loneliness and interpersonal problems.

**PRESENT STUDY**

Research on alexithymia is of remarkable important from the view point of interventional programs in treatments, based on emotional processing and regulation. It would be very helpful in designing counseling and training strategies for students. In Pakistan, research is in infancy thus present study will be a good donation in the area of exploration of relationship among alexithymia, loneliness and interpersonal problems. The foremost contribution of this study is to explore the problems faced by the students’ population in the framework of these constructs.

**METHOD**

**Research Design**

A co-relational research design was used in this research to assess the relationship among alexithymia, loneliness and interpersonal problems in young adults.

**Sampling Strategy**

Purposive sampling was used, on the basis of some characteristics of the participants. The characteristics were age and the enrolment in university.

**Participants**

The sample consisted of individuals (N=240) both men (n=120) and women (n=120) having age (*M* =21.37, *SD* =1.94) and (*M* =21.38, *SD* =1.82) respectively. Every one of them had been enrolled in various programs of different private and government academic institutions of Lahore city.

**Assessment Measures**

**Socio-demographic variable questionnaire.** This questionnaire was developed with the help of existing literature review by the researcher according to the requirement of this research to get necessary information of the participant’s age, sex, education, birth order, no of siblings, parent’s education and occupation, family system, socioeconomic status, general home atmosphere and questions related to relationships.

**Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20).**Toronto Alexithymia Scale (Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994) is a 20-item self-report measure with three subscales i.e. Difficulty Identifying Feelings, Difficulty Describing Feelings and Externally Oriented Thinking. Responses are to be given on 5 point likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). High scores depicted higher levels of alexithymia while low scores manifested lower levels of alexithymia. Reliability and validity of the scale has been established (Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994). In the present study TAS -20 showed good internal consistency (items 20; α = .75).

**UCLA Loneliness Scale.** University of California-Los Angeles loneliness scale (Version 3; Russell, 1996) is a 20 item self-report measure used to assess interpersonal loneliness. Responses ranges from 1 (never) to 4 (always). The scores are summed up to get the overall index of loneliness. Higher scores indicate greater degree of loneliness. The scale has well established psychometric properties(Russell, 1996). In the present study UCLA was found to have high internal consistency (20 items; α=.81).

**Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (IIP-SC).**Inventory of Interpersonal Problems-Short Circumplex (Soldz, Budman, Demby, & Merry, 1995) is a self-report measure which was initially developed for clinical population later its psychometric properties were established on college students as well (Hopwood, Pincus, Demoor, & Koonce, 2008). The IIP-SC test form identifies a person’s most salient interpersonal difficulties. It has eight sub-scales: Domineering, Vindictive, Cold, Socially avoidant, Non Assertive, Exploitable, Self- Sacrificing and Intrusive. Each sub scale score resulted from summing all items assigned to that particular sub scales. Summing the score of all 8 sub- scales gave the overall IIP-SC score. For all the items, the responses are given ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). In the present study IIP-SC showed excellent internal consistency (32 items; α = .89).

**PROCEDURE**

After permissions were taken from the respective authors of the questionnaires a pilot study was conducted to find out the feasibility of research proposal and the understanding of the questionnaires by the participants. A total of 7 students were independently approached. Two of them apologized to participate so pilot study was conducted on 5 students only. After whichfor the intention of data collection many departments of different universities of Lahore city were visited including University of the Punjab, Bahudinzikriya University, Forman Christian College University, University of Management and Technology and Comsats. Consent was taken from the head of departments to conduct the study on their students. After providing all the necessary information to the participants, their sanction to participate in the study was taken and questionnaires were given to the participants.

The data was collected in classroom setting under the supervision of the researcher. Almost 26 participants refused to participate in the study due to different reasons while 18 forms were discarded by the researchers. A data of 49 men and 47 women was collected from University of the Punjab, 23 men and 35 women from Bahudinzikriya University, 26 men and 5 women from Forman Christian College University, 12 men and 14 women from University of Management Sciences and 10 men and 14 women from Comsats.

**RESULTS**

The present study suggests that there is likely to be a correlation between alexithymia, loneliness and interpersonal problems. For this reason, correlation was calculated to find out the relationship between these variables and their subscales. Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20) consists of three subscalesi.e. Difficulty Identifying Feelings, Difficulty Describing Feelings, and Externally Oriented Thinking. The scores of TAS-20have been computed separately for each subscale as well as the total score. Similarly, the scores had been computed for Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (IIP-SC) which consisted of eight subscales i.e. dominating, vindictive, distant/cold, socially avoidant, non-assertive, exploitable, overly nurturant, and intrusive.

**Table 1:** Pearson’s Product Moment Correlations for Alexithymia, its Subscales, Loneliness, Interpersonal Problems and its Subscales

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Variables | *1* | *2* | *3* | *4* | *5* | *6* | *7* | *8* | *9* | *10* | *11* | *12* | *13* | *14* | *M* | *SD* |
| 1 | DIF | - | .57\*\* | .21\*\* | .84\*\* | .44\*\* | .43\*\* | .38\*\* | .34\*\* | .32\*\* | .43\*\* | .43\*\* | .31\*\* | .38\*\* | .51\*\* | 18.60 | 5.61 |
| 2 | DDF |  | - | .22\*\* | .77\*\* | .34\*\* | .25\*\* | .18\*\* | .27\*\* | .15\* | .33\*\* | .30\*\* | .24\*\* | .16\*\* | .31\*\* | 14.57 | 3.92 |
| 3 | EOT |  |  | - | .61\*\* | .38\*\* | .29\*\* | .26\*\* | .28\*\* | .15\* | .19\*\* | .16\*\* | .09 | .29\*\* | .29\*\* | 22.24 | 4.39 |
| 4 | TAS-20 |  |  |  | - | .52\*\* | .45\*\* | .38\*\* | .40\*\* | .29\*\* | .43\*\* | .41\*\* | .30\*\* | .39\*\* | .51\*\* | 55.40 | 10.48 |
| 5 | UCLA |  |  |  |  | - | .39\*\* | .40\*\* | .48\*\* | .39\*\* | .52\*\* | .48\*\* | .35\*\* | .30\*\* | .56\*\* | 46.58 | 8.27 |
| 6 | PA |  |  |  |  |  | - | .66\*\* | .59\*\* | .45\*\* | .53\*\* | .51\*\* | .40\*\* | .55\*\* | .79\*\* | 6.43 | 3.46 |
| 7 | BC |  |  |  |  |  |  | - | .65\*\* | .42\*\* | .54\*\* | .49\*\* | .32\*\* | .63\*\* | .80\*\* | 6.15 | 3.68 |
| 8 | DE |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | - | .45\*\* | .59\*\* | .48\*\* | .36\*\* | .42\*\* | .76\*\* | 6.44 | 3.34 |
| 9 | FG |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | - | .47\*\* | .36\*\* | .24\*\* | .32\*\* | .67\*\* | 7.03 | 5.17 |
| 10 | HI |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | - | .64\*\* | .49\*\* | .45\*\* | .79\*\* | 7.15 | 3.38 |
| 11 | JK |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | - | .55\*\* | .47\*\* | .75\*\* | 7.22 | 3.43 |
| 12 | LM |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | - | .39\*\* | .61\*\* | 7.99 | 3.07 |
| 13 | NO |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | - | .71\*\* | 6.50 | 3.63 |
| 14 | IIP-SC |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | - | 54.91 | 21.51 |

*Note.* DIF= Difficulty Identifying Feelings, DDF= Difficulty Describing Feelings, EOT= Externally Oriented Thinking, TAS-20= total score of Toronto Alexithymia Scale, UCLA= total score of University of California Loneliness Scale, PA=Dominating, BC= vindictive, DE=distant/cold, FG = socially avoidant, HI = non assertive, JK = exploitable, LM = overly nurturant, NO= intrusive, IIP-SC=total score of Inventory of Interpersonal Problems- Short Circumplex, *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation.

\**p*< 0.05. \*\**p*< .01

According to the hypothesis the relationship between alexithymia, loneliness, and interpersonal problems was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality. Results revealed that there is a strong, significant positive correlation between alexithymia and loneliness which infers that increase in alexithymia is associated with the increase in loneliness. Similarly, alexithymia has significant positive correlation with interpersonal problems depicting that increase in alexithymia is also related to increase in interpersonal problems. There is also significant positive correlation between loneliness and interpersonal problems which suggests that when loneliness increases, interpersonal problems also increase.

Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was calculated among the three factors of alexithymia as described by Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), loneliness and subscales of Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (IIP-SC). Factor 1 of TAS-20 (difficult identifying feelings) has a strong, significant relationship with loneliness, interpersonal problems and all the subscales of interpersonal problems. Similarly, factor 2 of TAS-20 (difficulty describing feelings) has significant relationship with loneliness, interpersonal problems and all the subscales of interpersonal problems. Factor 3 of TAS-20 (externally oriented thinking) has a significant relationship with loneliness, interpersonal problems and all the subscales of interpersonal problems except for overly nurturant (p = n.s). Loneliness has significant positive correlation with all the subscales of interpersonal problems.

Second hypothesis of the present study says that alexithymia is likely to predict loneliness and interpersonal problems so after finding the correlation between three variables, linear regression analysis was done. Regression analysis is used for investigation of relationships between variables and effect of one variable on the other as a predictor. The results of the linear regression indicated that alexithymia significantly predicts loneliness (F (1, 238) = 92.67, p< .001) and interpersonal problems (F (1, 238) = 87.59, p< .001).The results of the linear regression analysis are given below in table 2 and 3.

**Table 2:** Alexithymia as Predictor of Loneliness in Young Adults

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Loneliness | | | | | |
| Variable | B | | Β | | 95% CI |
| Constant | 23.41 | |  | | [18.58, 28.24] |
| Alexithymia | .41 | | .52\*\*\* | | [.33, .50] |
| R2 | | .28 | |  | |
| F | | 92.67\*\*\* | |  | |
| ΔR2 | | .28 | |  | |
| ΔF | | 92.67 | |  | |

Note. R2 = explained variance, ΔR2= R2 change, B = Unstandardized coefficient, β=Standardized coefficient.

\*\*\*p < .001.

**Table 3:** Alexithymia as Predictor of Interpersonal Problems in Young Adults

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Interpersonal Problems | | | | | |
| Variable | B | | Β | | 95% CI |
| Constant | -4.07 | |  | | [-16.70, 8.56] |
| Alexithymia | 1.06 | | .51\*\*\* | | [.84, 1.28] |
| R2 | | .26 | |  | |
| F | | 87.59\*\*\* | |  | |
| ΔR2 | | .26 | |  | |
| ΔF | | 87.59 | |  | |

Note. R2 = explained variance, ΔR2= R2 change, B = Unstandardized coefficient, β=Standardized coefficient.

\*\*\*p< .001

**DISCUSSION**

The current study focused on the relationship among alexithymia, loneliness and interpersonal problems in young adults. This study tried to find out if there is a predictive relationship among alexithymia, loneliness and interpersonal problems.

Pearson product moment correlation was used to test the relationship among alexithymia, loneliness and interpersonal problems in young adults which indicated a significant positive correlation between the three variables. In the next step linear regression analysis was employed to find out the predictive relationship of alexithymia with loneliness and interpersonal problems which reveals that alexithymia significantly predicts loneliness and interpersonal problems.

The results of table 1 manifested a significant positive relationship among the three variables. It was found that increase in alexithymia would cause increase in loneliness and interpersonal problems as supported by the findings of previously done researches i.e. Quarter et al. (2009) found a direct relationship of alexithymia with loneliness and different domains of interpersonal distrust in a student sample. Similarly, Nick and Colin (2013) suggested that increase in alexithymia would result in an increase in the feeling of loneliness concluding that alexithymia was positively associated with loneliness.

Furthermore, it was found that increase in alexithymia lead to an increase in interpersonal problems. The results were consistent with the study of Besharat (2010) who manifested a significant relationship between alexithymia and interpersonal problems. Similarly, another study revealed that high alexithymics scored significantly higher on interpersonal problems in comparison to low alexithymics (Spitzer et al., 2005; Vanheule et al., 2010). Findings suggested that alexithymia influences interpersonal relationships.

Moreover, significant positive relationship was found between loneliness and interpersonal problems. The result can be validated by a study of Chen (2009) who found that greater the quality and quantity of interpersonal relationships of adolescents, higher will be their feeling of belongingness and higher belongingness to family and friends was associated with lesser loneliness experienced by the adolescents. Rotenberg (1994) conducted three studies to examine the relationship between loneliness and interpersonal trust. From the three studies, it was concluded that loneliness was negatively associated to individual’s interpersonal trust on different bases of trust (reliability and emotional) and across different domains of trust i.e. beliefs and behaviors.

In Table 1, it was found that alexithymia has a significant positive relationship with all the subscales of interpersonal problems i.e. dominating, vindictive, cold, socially avoidant, non assertive, exploitable, overly nurturant and intrusive. The results can be verified with the study of Zarei and Besharat (2010) who found that there was a significant positive correlation between alexithymia and problems associated with assertiveness, sociability, intimacy and responsibility. Similarly, in another study alexithymia was found to be related to cold, socially avoidant and non-assertive (Vanheule, Desmat, & Meganck, 2007).

Subscales of alexithymia i.e. difficulty identifying feelings (DIF), difficulty describing feelings (DDF) and externally oriented thinking (EOT) were found to be in significant positive relationship with loneliness as supported by the findings of Quarter et al. (2009). They studied the relationship of subscales of alexithymia with three types of loneliness i.e. romantic loneliness, family loneliness and social loneliness. Results suggested that DIF was related to family and social loneliness, EOT was related to romantic loneliness while DDF was related to all the three types of loneliness. In the present study, results revealed that subscales ofAlexithymia were in significant relationship with interpersonal problems. Results can be verified from a study of Humphreys, Wood, and Parker (2009) as they showed that difficulty identifying feelings, describing feelings and externally oriented thinking had a significant negative correlation with general satisfaction with relationships.

Correlation between the three subscales of TAS-20 (difficulty identifying feelings, describing feelings and externally oriented thinking) and eight subscales of IIP-SC (dominating, vindictive, cold, socially avoidant, nonassertive, exploitable, overly nurturant and intrusive) was also calculated as shown in table 1. It was found that difficulty identifying feelings (DIF) was associated with all the eight subscales of IIP-SC. Similarly, difficulty describing feelings (DDF) was significantly related to all of the eight subscales of IIP-SC. However, externally oriented thinking (EOT) had significant relationship with seven subscales as intrusive subscale was found not to be related to EOT. Results can be validated with the study of Spitzer et al. (2005) who suggested that DIF was related with all the eight subscales Inventory of Interpersonal Problems-Circumplex (IIP-C), similarly, he found DDF to be related to all the subscales of IIP-C except intrusive. While, EOT was found to be associated with all the subscales except overly nurturant and intrusive.

The second hypothesis stated that alexithymia is likely to predict loneliness and interpersonal problems. First part of the hypothesis was alexithymia predicts loneliness. Results supported the hypothesis and proved that alexithymia predicts loneliness. Findings of the study were consistent with previous literature. A study entitled loneliness, interpersonal distrust, and alexithymia in university students assessed the predictive relationship of alexithymia and loneliness. Univariate analysis showed that alexithymia moderately predicted loneliness (Quarter et al., 2009).

Second part of the hypothesis was alexithymia predicts interpersonal problems. Results verified the hypothesis and suggested that alexithymia predicts interpersonal problems. Findings of the study were consistent with previous literature. Zarei and Besharat (2010) conducted a study on Alexithymia and interpersonal problems. Regression test of this study revealed that 58% of variance related to interpersonal problems was explained by alexithymia. In another study conducted on alexithymia and interpersonal problems, it was found through linear regression analysis that alexithymia is significantly and stably related to interpersonal problems (Vanheule et al., 2007).

**CONCLUSION**

The present study revealed a significant positive relationship among alexithymia, loneliness and interpersonal problems in young adults. Similarly, all of the three facets of alexithymia were having a positive relationship with loneliness and interpersonal problems. Furthermore, it was concluded that alexithymia was a predictor of loneliness and interpersonal problems. The results can be useful in designing interventional programs, strategies for treatment or counseling based on regulation of emotions.

There are some limitations to this study that need to be mentioned. The data was collected from educational institutions. To enhance the generalizability of the findings, young adults who are not enrolled in academic institutions should also be included as a sample.

**FUTURE IMPLICATIONS**

The present study posits several implications for educational and counseling practices.

It has added valuable insights to a better understanding of alexithymia in interpersonal perspective. There are therapies which focus on improving the emotional and social skills, cognitive processing of the emotional knowledge and regulation of emotions. These educational programs can be applied at university level to improve the efficiency of students. Such training should easily be taught in universities, as there is evidence that social skills training and group therapies enhance interpersonal skills. This type of intervention would be cost effective in the long term, as associated medical costs would decrease.

The study has its implications for clinical psychological practice. Because highly alexithymic persons tend to withdraw from others and refrain from sharing experiences, it can be expected that they will b reluctant to engage in psychotherapeutic relationships as well. Attending to their own affective experiences is not their habit, nor disclosing them to anyone. We suggest that psychological intervention with these individuals should counter these basic habits.

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