

A Gender Study on Alexithymia, Romantic Relationship & Emotions among College Students

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ABSTRACT

Alexithymia is described as an ability to perceive one's emotions and control them, which can cause problems in interpersonal relationships such as fear of intimacy and insecure attachments. For those in relationship with alexithymic individuals, feelings of loneliness, uncertainty and misunderstandings frequently surface. It's critical to acknowledge what alexithymia people experience in the context of a romantic relationship. The aim of the current research is to study alexithymia, romantic relationships and emotions among college going males and females. A sample of 60 college going students (30 Males & 30 Females) aged between 18-25 years, who are currently dating was taken. Standardized scales were used to measure alexithymia, romantic relationship and emotions. The result found out that there is no significant difference among males and females in alexithymia, relationship satisfaction and emotions. There is negative correlation between relationship satisfaction and alexithymia whereas a positive correlation was found between positive emotions and relationship satisfaction. Further a negative correlation was found between negative emotions and relationship satisfaction and a positive correlation was found between alexithymia and negative emotions. Although some people are better at talking and expressing feelings freely but with the help of practice and attention, people without this natural gift could be benefitted. One should always find constructive ways to express their feelings.

Keywords: Alexithymia, romantic relationships, emotions, college going males and females.

"Emotions, in my experience are not covered by single words. I don't believe in 'sadness', 'joy' or 'regret'. Maybe the best proof that the language is patriarchal is that it oversimplifies feeling... I've never had the right words to describe my life, and now that I've entered my story, I need them more than ever." – Jeffrey Eugenides

The emotional experience of a person is complicated, as Eugenides implies. The words we have at our disposal frequently fall short of completely conveying our experience to others. Consider how challenging this task must be for people who have trouble differentiating between their basic emotional states. Since emotions are a crucial component of interpersonal contact, it would not only be personally frustrating but also have a detrimental effect on how well one participated in the social context. Sifenos (1973) coined

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the term "alexithymia" to describe a collection of behaviors that he frequently saw in people who were suffering from various physical and mental health issues. A general word used to describe issues with feeling emotions is alexithymia. In actuality, the imprecise translation of this Greek phrase utilized in Freudian psychodynamic theories is "no words for emotions." environment. People who have alexithymia may say that they find it difficult to express feelings that are considered socially acceptable, such as happiness during happy occasions. Others could additionally struggle to recognize their feelings.

A study was conducted on 158 undergraduate students taking a first year psychology course. The results found out that there is negative relationship between alexithymia and relationship satisfaction and there is positive relationship alexithymia and interpersonal problems (Humphreys et al., 2009).

A study was conducted on 69 long term relationships. The results found out that individuals with high scores on alexithymia reported receiving less support from their romantic partners and anticipated more unfavorable forms of support from their partners. They also reported showing less support to their partner. Additionally, non alexithymia individuals showed more social support to their partners (Wells, Rehman & Sutherland, 2016).

Alexithymia

Alexithymia is a subclinical phenomenon involving a lack of emotional awareness or, more specifically, difficulty in identifying and describing feelings and in distinguishing feelings from the bodily sensations of emotional arousal (Nemiah et al.,1976).

Alexithymia refers to difficulty in identifying feelings and a reduced ability to distinguish them from somatic sensations, difficulty describing feelings to others and a concrete, externally –oriented style of thinking (Taylor, Bagby & Parker, 1997).

In a study by Mallinckrodt & Wei (2005) on undergraduate university students, it was found that emotional awareness as indicated by lower levels of alexithymia to be negatively associated with attachment anxiety and avoidance and positively related with social self-efficacy and social support.

In a study by Montebancci et al., (2004) on adult attachment and alexithymia, it was found that alexithymia is positively related with discomfort with closeness, placing relationships as secondary and need for approval from others. Alexithymia was also found to be negatively associated with confidence in self and others.

In a study by Vanheule et al., (2007) it was found that low levels of reported affection and connection with others are associated with alexithymia, as are difficulties communicating needs to others and handling difficulties in social settings and intimate relationships, as measured by the relationship assessment (Hendrick,1988), the global measure of sexual satisfaction (Lawrance & Byers,1998), and the positive and negative affect schedule (Watson, Clark & Tellegen,1988).

Romantic Relationship

A romantic relationship is a mutual, ongoing, and voluntary interactions between two partners that is characterized by specific expressions of affection and intimacy (Collins et al.,2009).

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A study was conducted on 78 individuals who have been studied intensively from infancy to their mid 20's. The result found out that the individuals classified as securely attached at 12 months old were rated as more socially competent during early elementary school by their teachers. Individuals social competence, in turn, forecasted having more secure relationships with close friends at age 16, which in turn predicted more positive daily emotional experiences in their adult romantic relationships and less negative affect in conflict resolution and collaborative tasks with their romantic partners (Simpson et al., 2007).

A study was conducted on 313 males and 375 females to investigate the moderating role of attachment styles on the relationship of alexithymia and fear of intimacy with marital satisfaction. The results revealed that only avoidant attachment style could moderate the relationship between alexithymia and marital satisfaction. Also, the relationship of alexithymia and fear of intimacy with marital satisfaction is not a simple linear one. Hence, secure and insecure attachment characteristics may have significant influence in marital relationship in opposite directions (Besharat et al., 2014).

Emotions

- The term emotion denotes a state of being moved, stirred up or aroused in some way (Jersild, 1960).
- Emotion is an acute disturbance of the individual as a whole, psychological in origin, involving behavior, conscious experience and visceral functioning (Young, 1961).
- An emotion is a complex psychological state that involves 3 distinct components, a subjective experience, a physiological response and a behavioral or expressive response (Hockenbury & Hockenbury, 2007).

A cross sectional study was conducted on 600 college going students to study the relationship between emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships. The result found out that the emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships of college students were above average level. Also, their emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships showed significant differences by gender, romantic relationship, monthly allowance, family status. Female students have higher emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationship satisfaction than male students. Further, it was also found that the perceived level of emotional intelligence was positive correlated with interpersonal relationships (Hsieh et al., 2014).

A study was conducted on 27 alexithymic and 26 non-alexithymic people to study the relationship of alexithymia with emotion regulation difficulties. The result found out that as compared to non-alexithymics, the alexithymics showed greater emotion regulation difficulties. Also, alexithymics reported more health related problems as compared to non-alexithymics and the health problems of alexithymics are likely to be an outcome of their emotion regulation difficulties (Pandey et al., 2011)

Purpose

The purpose is to study alexithymia, romantic relationship and emotions among college going males and females.

Hypothesis

- There will be a significant relation between Alexithymia & Emotions.
- There will be a significant relation between Alexithymia & Relationship Satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

A total of 60 people participated from Chandigarh in the study of which 30 were males and 30 were females. The age of the subjects ranges from 18 to 25 years.

Measures

- **Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS 20):** as given by Bagby et al. (1994) consists of 20 questions, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Used as an instrument for the assessment of alexithymia.
- **The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS):** as given by Watson, Clark & Tellegen (1988) consists of 20 items, ranging from very slightly or not at all to extremely. Used for the assessment of emotions.
- **Relationship Satisfaction Scale:** as given by Burns (1983) consists of 7 items, ranging from very dissatisfied to very satisfied. Used for the assessment of level of satisfaction in the relationship.

Procedure

The participants were informed about the research and the questionnaires were filled through Google forms, each participant was thanked for their cooperation. Standardized Psychological Tests were administered to the participants.

RESULTS

Analysis Data

The responses of participants were analyzed using t-test to see the effect of alexithymia on relationship satisfaction and emotions among a sample of college going males and females. Mean and Standard deviation data is presented in table 1, table 2 shows the correlation between alexithymia, difficulty identifying emotions, difficulty describing emotions, externally oriented thinking, relationship satisfaction, negative emotions and positive emotions and table 3 shows the effect of alexithymia on relationship satisfaction and emotions among males and females.

Table 1: shows the Mean and Standard deviation data of the sample

	Alexithymia	Difficulty identifying emotions	Difficulty describing emotions	Externally oriented thinking	Relationship satisfaction	Positive emotions	Negative emotions
N	60	60	60	60	60	60	60
Mean	49.7	16.9	12.9	19.4	33.8	36.8	22.2
Standard deviation	10.4	5.00	3.88	4.51	9.53	7.83	7.74

Table 2 shows the correlation of all variables

	Alexithymia	Difficulty identifying emotions	Difficulty describing emotions	Externally oriented thinking	Relationship satisfaction	Positive emotions	Negative emotions
Alexithymia	—						
Difficulty identifying emotions	0.834***	—					
Difficulty describing emotions	0.838***	0.640***	—				
Externally oriented thinking	0.557***	0.202	0.264*	—			

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Relationship satisfaction	-0.387**	-0.349**	-0.308*	-0.195	—		
Positive emotions	-0.216	-0.046	-0.221	-0.237	0.430***	—	
Negative emotions	0.497***	0.534***	0.394**	0.200	-0.430***	-0.166	—

Table 3: shows T- statistics of the groups

	Group	N	Mean	SD	T-Stats
Alexithymia	Female	30	49.3	9.91	0.732
	Male	30	50.2	11.07	
Difficulty identifying emotions	Female	30	17.2	4.50	0.628
	Male	30	16.6	5.51	
Difficulty describing emotions	Female	30	12.3	3.92	0.275
	Male	30	13.4	3.81	
Externally oriented thinking	Female	30	19.4	4.89	0.910
	Male	30	19.5	4.18	
Relationship satisfaction	Female	30	35.5	7.79	0.169
	Male	30	32.1	10.87	
Positive emotions	Female	30	35.6	8.43	0.225
	Male	30	38.1	7.10	
Negative emotions	Female	30	23.2	8.50	0.321
	Male	30	21.2	6.90	

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results found out that there is a negative correlation between relationship satisfaction and alexithymia ($r = -0.387$, $p < .01$). Further a positive correlation was found between positive emotions and relationship satisfaction ($r = 0.430$, $p < .001$) and a negative correlation was found between negative emotions and relationship satisfaction ($r = -0.430$, $p < .001$). Also, a positive correlation was found between negative emotions and alexithymia ($r = 0.497$, $p < .001$).

The results also found out that there is no significant difference among males and females in alexithymia, relationship satisfaction and emotions.

A study was conducted on 146 participants on processing of facial expressions of negative emotion in Alexithymia. The results found out that the alexithymia component of difficulty in describing feelings was inversely related to the ability to detect expressions of negative emotion. Alexithymic components positive and negative affectivity were unrelated to response bias. The results emphasize the influence of difficulty describing feelings within the alexithymia construct and its difference from positive and negative affectivity. They suggest that an alexithymic deficit in describing feelings is associated with a deficit in processing negative emotions that is most apparent when processing capacity is challenged (Parker et al., 2005).

A study was conducted on 147 boys and 210 girls to examine the relationship between alexithymia and interpersonal problems. The results found out that alexithymia has a significant positive association with interpersonal problems. Results of regression analysis revealed that alexithymia and its components can predict the students' interpersonal problems regarding assertiveness, sociability, submissiveness, intimacy, responsibility, and controlling. (Zarei & Besharat, 2010)

CONCLUSION

The research study comprehends Alexithymia, relationship satisfaction and emotions among college going males and females. There was no significant difference among males and females in alexithymia, relationship satisfaction and emotions. There was a negative correlation between alexithymia and relationship satisfaction and between alexithymia and positive emotions. Also, a positive relationship was found between positive emotions and relationship satisfaction and between alexithymia and negative emotions.

People with alexithymia have difficulty in expressing emotions which results in disturbances in their romantic relationships. One should try trusting their partners and find constructive ways to express their feelings. Also try to understand and identify what things upset you and makes you not want to express your feelings. Practicing mindfulness through meditation, yoga or breathing exercises also helps in understanding oneself better.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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