

UNDERSTANDING ALEXITHYMIA: A REVIEW OF PSYCHOSOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

MEMOONA JAHANGIR¹ AND AMENA ZEHRA ALI²

¹Institute of Clinical Psychology, Karachi, Pakistan.

²Department of Psychology, University of Karachi, Pakistan.

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CORRESPONDENCE: MEMOONA JAHANGIR E-mail: memoona_jahangir92@live.com

ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE

The objective of the review is to understand the multifaceted construct of alexithymia and its association with psychosocial variables.

METHOD

A thorough examination of the literature on the construct of alexithymia was conducted, encompassing studies published over several years. The empirical findings over the years regarding various psychosocial variables, including attachment styles and empathy, were also reviewed. The sociodemographic characteristics and comorbidity of alexithymia with other mental health conditions were also analysed, and its treatment approach is also discussed.

RESULTS

The review revealed that attachment bond plays a significant role in the development of alexithymia, childhood trauma due to unhealthy mother-infant bond can be one of the reasons for difficulty in understanding emotions, which leads to difficulties in empathy as well. Furthermore, alexithymia has been found to be comorbid with depression, anxiety, autism, and other mental illnesses.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the review suggest that alexithymia is an important construct which can influence various psychosocial aspects of life. Although some of the variables have been extensively studied, much remains unclear. Further research will add up value to comprehensively evaluating the impact of alexithymia on psychosocial aspects

KEYWORDS

Adverse Childhood Experiences; Affective Symptoms; Anxiety; Autistic Disorder; Comorbidity; Emotions; Empathy; Mental Disorders.

INTRODUCTION

Alexithymia is a Greek word (A= no, Lexis = words, Thymos= emotions) which refers to no words for emotions. It was first introduced by Nemiah and Sifneos¹ and its salient features are: 1) difficulties in identifying emotions; 2) difficulties in describing emotions; and 3) an oriented thinking style. It is considered a dimensional personality trait and not a categorical all-or-none phenomenon.² It is a construct that includes both affective and cognitive aspects, and it is defined as impairments in the understanding, regulating, and conveying of emotions, which is referred to as cognitive-affective disturbance.³

Alexithymia is divided into two types: primary and secondary alexithymia. Primary alexithymia refers to a stable personality trait that is moulded in childhood and can be considered developmental, whereas secondary alexithymia can be developed later in life when an individual goes through some trauma in life or through environmental and sociocultural issues.³

The psychodynamic approach offered a more nuanced view that alexithymia can be connected to immature defensive mechanisms like suppression and/or avoiding powerful emotional experiences.¹ Freyberger⁴ and McDougall⁵ concluded that alexithymia can be repercussion from an ineffective defence mechanism against intense emotions rather than from a core lack of emotional experience. Alexithymia is not only limited to difficulty in experiencing and communicating one's own feelings; it can be more profound dysfunction in emotion regulation, which can cause distress at the personal level as well as diminished emotional concern for other.⁶

The purpose of this review is to understand the dynamics of alexithymia. In Pakistan, this variable is not much explored. Factors that play an important role were studied. This review also predicts what alexithymia can lead to.

METHOD

The review was open, and over 50 years of research have been reviewed. The research was not limited and has been taken from worldwide, and empirical studies were picked. It includes both qualitative and quantitative studies.

Eligibility Criteria

The papers included were published in English, and worldwide research on the alexithymia was included. Papers from over 50 years were included in the review. Empirical studies were selected, and both qualitative and quantitative studies were reviewed.

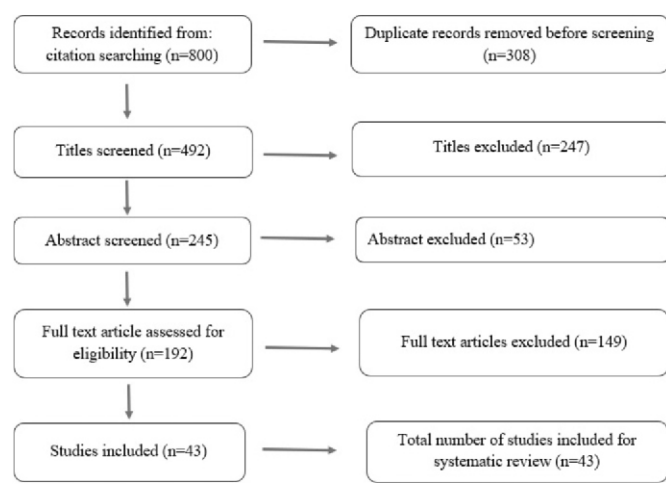
Information sources

Five databases were used to find papers on alexithymia from over 50 years. These databases included PubMed, Google Scholar, Science Direct, ResearchGate, and SAGE journals.

Search

The search was carried out primarily using keywords 'alexithymia', 'predictors of alexithymia', 'alexithymia and empathy', 'alexithymia and attachment styles', 'alexithymia leading to psychiatric conditions', 'alexithymia and its relationship with sociodemographic', and with the help of Google Chrome.

FIGURE 1
Summary of Systematic Review Screening Process



RESULTS

Table 1 contains the summary of all the results examining alexithymia and psychosocial factors.

Table 1
Summary of Findings from Literature

Study	Findings
Bowlby (2008); ⁷ Laible (2007) ⁸ Berenbaum & James (1994) ⁹	Attachment styles are linked to communication skills, emotion regulation and social conduct. Children who feel physically and emotionally unsafe likely to develop alexithymia as they find it difficult to express their emotions.
Xie et al. (2021) ¹⁰ Laible (2007) ⁸	Mother infant bond is root cause of alexithymia. Secure attachment styles are linked to emotional awareness.
De Rick & Vanheule (2007) ¹¹ ; De Rick & Vanheule (2006) ¹²	Insecure attachment style is associated with difficulty in identifying feelings which is one of the components of alexithymia.
Oskis et al. (2013) ¹³ Oskis et al. (2013) ¹³	Avoidant attachment style is associated with difficulty in describing feelings. Anxious attachment style is associated with external oriented thinking.
Wearden et al. (2000) ¹⁴ Bird & Viding (2014) ¹⁵	Maladaptive defenses are one of the major contributors in alexithymia Difficulty in understanding one's emotion leads to low level of empathy as they find it difficult to understand other person's emotions.
Brewer et al. (2016); ²¹ Murphy et al. (2018) ²²	Lack of introspection in alexithymia leads to low level of empathy.
Franz et al. (2008) ²³ Moriauchi et al. (2007) ²⁴ Kokkonen et al. (2001) ²⁵ Franz et al. (2008); ²³ Karukivi et al. (2015); ²⁶	Alexithymia increases with age. Alexithymia decreases with age. Males have high level of alexithymia. Females are more prone to alexithymia.
Sakkinen et al. (2007) ²⁷ Franz et al. (2008); ²³ Bojner et al. (2015); ²⁸	No association between gender and alexithymia. Alexithymia related to lesser years of education.
Joukamaa et al. (1996) ²⁹ Kokkonen et al. (2001) ²⁵ Berthoz & Hill (2005); ³¹ Pannicia et al. (2017); ³² Thorberg et al. (2016); ³³ Lumley et al. (2007); ³⁴ Schimmenti & Caretti (2018); ³⁵ Elmas et al. (2017); ³⁶ Brune (2005); ³⁷ Westwood et al. (2017) ³⁸	No association between alexithymia and years of education. Alexithymia is associated with lower income. Alexithymia leads to different psychiatric conditions.
Ogrodniczuk et al. (2011); ³⁹ Taylor (2000); ⁴¹ Kennedy & Franklin (2002) ⁴²	Psychotherapy is the mode of treatment which helps in learning emotion regulation

DISCUSSION

Alexithymia has been associated with many psychosocial aspects as well, and some of the important psychosocial factors with respect to Alexithymia have been discussed below:

Attachment Styles

An attachment style is considered to be a set of patterns within and around relationships, and they are mostly determined in childhood. Early relationships with significant attachment figures are essential for the development of communication skills, emotion regulation, and conduct in social circumstances, according to attachment theories.^{7,8}

Berenbaum and James⁹ investigated how alexithymia was carried in families. Children who grow up in circumstances where they feel physically unsafe, emotionally insecure, and where expressing emotions is disapproved are unlikely to learn effective skills, and as a result, they will find it hard to express their emotions. Moreover, past experiences of abuse have also been associated with alexithymia. A study concluded that childhood trauma or issues with the mother-infant bond are the root causes of alexithymia.¹⁰

Many studies have been conducted in order to study different components of alexithymia with types of attachment styles. Laible⁸ conducted research that concluded that secure attachment style is linked to emotional awareness and the ability to build close relationships with respect to having an empathetic capability. Insecure attachment style has been associated with a lack of emotional understanding, which is the component of alexithymia.^{11,12} Avoidant and anxious attachment styles contribute to higher levels of alexithymia. Moreover, difficulty in identifying feelings is also specifically linked to an anxious attachment style.¹³ Furthermore, difficulty in describing feelings is linked to avoidant attachment style, and externally oriented thinking is also linked to insecure attachment style, which concludes that different attachment styles can be associated with different components of alexithymia.¹³

A study conducted by Wearden and colleagues¹⁴ deduced that alexithymia is a by-product of maladaptive defences which are used to deal with heavy emotions; the development of emotional skills is determined by attachment styles in early childhood, and these attachment styles have the power to block the emotional experience as well.^{15,16}

Considering difficulties in understanding one's emotions due to attachment issues might lead to difficulties in understanding other people's emotions, empathy is an important factor to study in the light of alexithymia.

Empathy

Empathy is commonly described as putting oneself in another's shoes. It is an ability to understand other people's situation and perspective. Considering the notion of empathy, i.e., understanding the emotions, it can be attributed that

alexithymia is correlated to deficits in empathy, and for that purpose alexithymia can be the sole reason for empathetic difficulties.¹⁷ As per 'Simulation Theory,' the individual simulates another person's thoughts and beliefs and recreates them in their mind to understand the other person's state.¹⁸ Thus, it will be challenging to understand and relate to the emotions of others if one is unable to effectively evaluate and describe their own internal affective states.

Bird and Viding¹⁹ also explain in their Self to Other Model of Empathy (SOME) that learnt emotional associations can be understood by understanding the factors that impact one's personal experience of emotion. The affective representation system, which holds representations of one's current affective state and is probably situated between the insular cortex and the anterior cingulate cortex, is thought to be the primary area of dysfunction in alexithymia. An inability to generate a consciously accessible representation of one's own affective state, which is compatible with the alexithymia characteristics of inability to identify and describe emotions.

Another perspective: Alexithymia is also associated with a deficit in interoceptive awareness.²⁰ Interoceptive awareness is the ability to identify, access, understand, and respond appropriately to patterns of internal signals. It is a crucial component of empathy, and lack of introspection skills is also one of the characterisations of alexithymia.^{21,22}

Other than psychological factors, sociodemographic factors have also been found to be of great importance while studying alexithymia.

Sociodemographic variables

Alexithymia and sociodemographic have been studied in order to determine their relationship or association. There are contradictory findings in between age and alexithymia, as the research shows inconsistent results in adult samples; some studies show no association,²³ other studies suggest that alexithymia increases with age, and still others suggest that alexithymia decreases with age.²⁴ Likewise, studies conducted to see the association between gender and alexithymia also have inconsistent findings. Some studies suggest that males score higher on alexithymia as compared to females,²⁵ while others suggest that females scored higher on the variable alexithymia.^{23,26}

As females are allowed to express themselves emotionally whereas men are discouraged for the expression of emotion. However, research conducted by Sakkinen and colleagues²⁷ showed no significant difference between males and females. Characteristics of alexithymia have also been studied separately by Joukamaa and his colleagues,²⁸ who concluded that men scored higher on difficulty in describing feelings and externally oriented thinking, but there was no difference found in difficulty in identifying feelings among male and female. The association between alexithymia and education level is not well defined, as there are contradictory researches

and Some researches shows no association between level of education and alexithymia,²⁹ while some research has concluded that alexithymia is associated with lesser years of education.^{23,30} As far as socioeconomic status is concerned, alexithymia is mostly related to lower income.²⁵

The causes of some of the associations are still unknown; further studies can be done to understand the associations and what potential causes can contribute to alexithymia.

Psychiatric Conditions and Other Psychosocial factors

It has been observed that alexithymia has been associated with psychiatric conditions more than with the general population.³¹ It has been most prominently associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder³¹ and it also has very much significance for developing clinical disorders like anxiety and depression.³² Alcohol dependence has also been found in alexithymia, but mostly in high-level alexithymic individuals.³³ Genetic and childhood environmental factors also contribute to alexithymia³⁴ and as we discussed the significance of attachment styles for developing alexithymia, it can lead to trauma and other psychological illnesses as the stressful environment does have an impact on the psychological well-being of an individual.³⁵

Moreover, impulse control problems like gambling have also been associated with alexithymia.³⁶ Neurological disorders like Parkinson's have also relevance in alexithymia, as does schizophrenia.³⁷ Alexithymia has also been associated with eating disorders.³⁸ As alexithymia contributes to psychiatric disorders, there are many studies that have proposed effective treatments for alexithymia.

Treatment Considerations

Considering the level of alexithymia, it was concluded by Ogrodniczuk and colleagues³⁹ that it is more likely that individuals with low levels of alexithymia are more likely to benefit from psychotherapy as compared to individuals with high levels of alexithymia. Moreover, many psychotherapists devised treatment strategies to treat alexithymia. Levant and colleagues⁴⁰ devised a six-session program that included emotional awareness and emotional regulation to treat alexithymia, as individuals with alexithymia lack these. Emotion regulation has to be the core symptom to treat in alexithymia.⁴¹ Skill-based interventions, cognitive behaviour therapy, and psychoeducation about feelings and emotions are also founded to be helping in the treatment of alexithymia.⁴²

Limitations

The studies reviewed and included have a limited sample size, which might also restrain the interpretation of the studies. Moreover, some of the articles were inaccessible, which has limited access to broader knowledge. There are many other psychosocial variables that can be studied in order to understand alexithymia extensively.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review gives valuable insights into understanding the multifaceted nature of alexithymia. Through a comprehensive analysis of the literature review, it is found that alexithymia is associated with several variables, including childhood trauma, empathy, and comorbidity with other mental health conditions. Mother-infant bond plays a significant role in understanding emotions in childhood; an unhealthy bond might lead to alexithymia. This analysis also shed light on difficulty in empathizing. As alexithymia does have an impact on psychological health, treatment approaches have also been reviewed. Overall, despite the progress made in understanding alexithymia, there is still much that remains unknown about this construct, further research is needed to fully understand alexithymia in clinical setting and in society at large.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

DISCLOSURE

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AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION / UNDERTAKING FORM

Sr. #	Author(s) Name	Author(s) Affiliation	Contribution
1.	Memoona Jahangir	Institute of Clinical Psychology, Karachi, Pakistan.	Developing the idea and first draft
2.	Prof. Dr Amena Zehra Ali	Department of Psychology, University of Karachi, Pakistan.	Supervision & development of final draft

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