

ALEXITHYMIA AND LONELINESS: THE MODERATING ROLE OF INTERPERSONAL PROBLEMS IN EDUCATED YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE

To investigate the nature of relationship of alexithymia and loneliness under the moderating effect of interpersonal problems in university students.

STUDY DESIGN

Cross sectional study.

PLACE AND DURATION OF STUDY

This study was conducted in different government, private, and semi-government universities of Lahore, Pakistan from February to August 2014.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

The sample comprised of 276 students, enrolled in different universities of Lahore city. Sample included both men and women aged between 18 to 25 years. Toronto Alexithymia Scale, University of California-Los Angeles Loneliness Scale – Version 3, and Inventory of Interpersonal Problems-Short Circumplex were used in this study along with a demographic form. The data was analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation and Moderation.

RESULTS

The results indicated that there was a significant positive correlation between alexithymia and loneliness ($r = .53, p < .01$), alexithymia and interpersonal problems ($r = .52, p < .01$), and loneliness and interpersonal problems ($r = .563, p < .01$). Alexithymia and interpersonal problems were found to be significant predictors of loneliness. The conditional effects on loneliness at different levels of interpersonal problems were also significant ($p < .001$).

CONCLUSION

The subjective experience of loneliness is enhanced by interpersonal problems for the individuals high on alexithymia. The results can be useful in designing interventional programs for treatment keeping in view difficulty with emotions and expressions.

KEY WORDS

Alexithymia, Loneliness, Interpersonal problems

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is a country with an estimated population of adolescents and young adults as one fourth of the total. The burden of social and economic development, political stability, consolidation and glorification of the future lies on the shoulders of youth. These years of young adulthood comes with challenging social values and norms, and later on it helps building the foundation of the world's future. Along with this the adults start going in to intimate relationships and develop network of supportive friends and this mutuality in relationships, socializable orientation propels young adults from adolescence toward full maturity¹.

Considering the challenges, a young adult is expected to conquer so emotional intelligence has gained prominence in the past decades. Emotional intelligence leads to wise behavior, high achievement, and mental health². Assessment of alexithymia is considered as a potential method for the identification of individuals with low emotional intelligence³. Alexithymia is a personality construct associated with reduced ability to identify and describe feelings, limited fantasy and imaginal activity and concrete way of thinking. Alexithymia can also be defined as a deficit in experiencing and processing emotions⁴. The core characteristics of alexithymia are marked dysfunction in emotional awareness, social attachment, and interpersonal relating⁵.

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. One of the major consequence of loneliness is that it negatively impacts the individual academic performance which can take the form of failure, decreasing grades, and/or drop out⁶.



Loneliness researcher Dr. William A. Sadler described the five categories of loneliness. Out of which the most common and prevalent type is interpersonal loneliness, this term is mostly used in terms of intimate relationships where the individual starts missing a significant person for example a spouse or a friend. Another type is social loneliness in which the person feels being left alone or cut off from a group, one wishes to be a member of. In the same way loneliness can be at the cultural level as well in which the person's traditions or cultural beliefs does not match those of the dominant society in which the individual is living leading to the feelings of alienation. If an individual starts feeling being out of touch with one's self or true emotions this can be termed as psychological loneliness⁷.

Talking about interpersonal relationships and loneliness, it can be said that

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everyone experiences interpersonal problems at some point in their life. Such interpersonal problem can be short lived or chronic. These conflicts can bring discomfort and distress to the individual which if prolonged can make the person vulnerable to many psychological disorders including depression and anxiety etc. Such interpersonal conflicts can be a result of intolerance to the opinions of others, might be a personality clash or at times it can originate due to some underlying psychological issues which not only effect the individual's social dealing but also one's own sense of self⁸.

Recently, there has been a growing interest in how alexithymia impacts loneliness, social judgment and social functioning of the individuals. Alexithymia being a sub clinical personality trait characterized by emotional disturbance has an impact on a number of areas of an individual's functioning which includes effectiveness in communication, satisfaction in the relationships, psychological well-being, productivity, and general mental health^{9,10}.

Informed by the existing literature, the present study advanced in investigating interpersonal problems as a moderator in the relationship between alexithymia and loneliness. Hypotheses were as follows:

- H1: There would be a correlation between alexithymia, loneliness and interpersonal problems.
- H2: Alexithymia would predict loneliness and interpersonal problems.
- H3: Interpersonal problems would moderate the relationship between alexithymia and loneliness.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Participants

The sample consisted of 276 university students both men and women. The students were enrolled in different undergraduate and masters programs and taken through convenient sampling technique. Inclusion criteria were enrollment in academic institutions and age between 18-25.

Instruments

Demographic information sheet included age, gender, education, birth order, no of siblings, socioeconomic status, general home atmosphere and questions related to relationships with family and friends.

Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20): Alexithymia was measured using TAS-20¹¹. It 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). In the present study TAS-20 showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .75$).

UCLA Loneliness Scale (UCLA): UCLA is a 20 item self-report measure used to assess interpersonal loneliness¹². Responses ranges from 1 (never) to 4 (always). In the present study UCLA was found to have high internal consistency ($\alpha = .81$).

Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (IIP-SC):

It is also a self-report measure which was initially developed for clinical population later its psychometric properties were established on college students as well¹³. 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 ($\alpha = .89$).

Procedure

This study protocol was approved by Doctoral Program Coordination Committee (DPCC), Centre for Clinical Psychology, and University of the Punjab. Written permissions were taken from the authors of the questionnaires and the administration of the universities. Sample was recruited using convenient sampling strategy. After providing all the necessary information to the participants, written informed consent was taken 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. No financial and other inducements were offered for participation in this study. The data were analyzed using SPSS 21.

RESULTS

The sample consisted of 147 men (mean age, $M=22.19$, $SD=1.14$) and 129 women ($M=21.27$, $SD=1.72$). The students were enrolled in different undergraduate (84.15%) and masters (15.85%) programs. Almost 60% of the participants were day scholar, 27.5% were hostelites, and 10.8% had other mode of residence.

Pearson Product Moment Correlation was calculated to find out the relationship between alexithymia, loneliness, and interpersonal problems (Table 1). Preliminary analyses were performed to eliminate violation of the assumptions of normality. Results revealed that there was a moderate significant positive correlation between alexithymia and loneliness ($r = .53$, $p < .01$), between alexithymia and interpersonal problems ($r = .52$, $p < .01$), and between loneliness and interpersonal problems ($r = .57$, $p < .01$). Moreover, all of the three factors of alexithymia i.e. difficulty identifying feelings, difficulty describing feelings, and externally oriented thinking were found to have significant positive correlation with loneliness ($r = .44$, $p < .01$, $r = .34$, $p < .01$, $r = .38$, $p < .01$ respectively) and interpersonal problems ($r = .51$, $p < .01$, $r = .31$, $p < .01$, $r = .29$, $p < .01$ respectively).

Table 1
Correlation among Self-Conscious Emotions and Internalizing Disorders

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	14	M	SD
1 DIF	-	.57**	.21**	.84**	.44**	.51**	18.60	5.61
2 DDF		-	.77**	.34**	.31**		14.57	3.92
3 EOT			-	.61**	.29**		22.24	4.39
4 TAS -20				-	.52**		55.40	10.48
5 UCLA					-	.56**	46.58	8.27
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, IIP-SC=total score of Inventory of Interpersonal Problems- Short Circumplex, M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation.
* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < .01$

To understand the relative contribution of alexithymia and interpersonal problems in predicting loneliness and to figure out the moderating role of interpersonal problems in the relationship of alexithymia and loneliness, moderation analysis was run using Process Plugin.

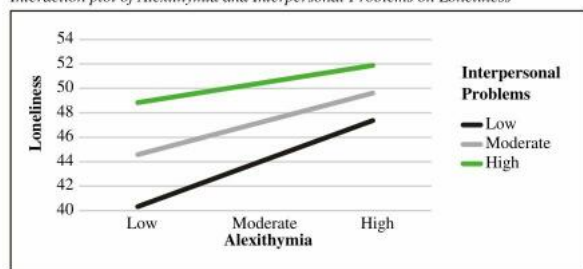
Table 2
Regression Analysis Examining the Interaction Effect of Alexithymia and Interpersonal Problems on Loneliness (N=240)

Variables	Loneliness		
	B	SE	95 % CI
Constant	11.98*	5.13	[1.86, 22.10]
Alexithymia	.48***	.10	[-.29, .68]
Interpersonal Problems	.40***	.10	[-.20, .59]
Alexithymia x Interpersonal Problems	-.004**	.002	[-.008; .004]
Low Interpersonal Problems	.33***	.06	[-.23, .44]
Moderate Interpersonal Problems	.24***	.05	[-.15, .33]
High Interpersonal Problems	.15*	.06	[-.02, .30]
R ²	.64		
F	54.90***		

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

The results revealed that alexithymia and interpersonal problems are found to be significant predictors of loneliness. The interaction effects of alexithymia and interpersonal problems on loneliness was also significant (Table 2). Moreover, the conditional effects on loneliness at different levels of interpersonal problems were also analyzed, the interaction plot showed that the nature of relationship between alexithymia and loneliness was significant at all of the three levels interpersonal problems that is low, moderate, and high (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Interaction plot of Alexithymia and Interpersonal Problems on Loneliness



DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted to investigate the moderating role of interpersonal problems in determining the relationship between alexithymia and loneliness. In the present study it was evident that increase in alexithymia was associated with the increase in loneliness and interpersonal problems suggesting individuals low in alexithymia have better quality of their relationships. Moreover, individuals who have healthy social relationships do not experience the subjective feelings of loneliness. The findings supported the hypothesis and are consistent with the previous literature^{10,14,15}.

The second hypothesis of the present study suggesting that

alexithymia would predict interpersonal problems and loneliness has also been accepted which turned out to be consistent with the previous literature^{10,16}. Interpersonal problems act as an enhancer in the relationship between alexithymia and loneliness.

Few limitations of the study included cross-sectional research design and strictly relying on self-report measures. Future studies using experimental designs and interviews by clinicians would overcome this limitation. To enhance the generalizability of the findings, young adults who are not enrolled in academic institutions can also be included as a sample.

The present study posits several implications for educational and counseling practices. Interpersonal problems and loneliness are among the very prevalent issue of our youth. Based on this study intervention can be planned and delivered at community level focusing on improving the emotional regulation and social skills which is a pre-requisite for healthy interpersonal functioning and psychological wellbeing of individuals. Moreover, in clinical practice, anybody who is high on alexithymia would be resistant to identify and express his/her emotional experiences which in term hinder the therapeutic process. Awareness of the diverse consequences of alexithymia in the clinical practice would facilitate the clinicians to direct their intervention in a better way leading to improved outcomes of the therapy.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that alexithymia, interpersonal problems, and loneliness are positively correlated. Further, the relationship between alexithymia and loneliness is moderated by interpersonal problems. The individuals who are suffering from high levels of alexithymia are more prone to experience intense feelings of loneliness and this relationship is strengthened due to interpersonal problems.

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