

Alexithymia and Emotional Ambivalence as Predictors of College Adjustment

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Study Overview

The current study evaluated the constructs alexithymia and emotional ambivalence, regarding their impact on adjustment to college. Alexithymia is an emotional processing concept which is defined as difficulty identifying and describing feelings, externally oriented thought, and limited imaginal ability (Nemiah, Freyberger, & Sifneos, 1976; Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997). Emotional ambivalence is the ongoing internal conflict about the desire to hide emotions, despite external circumstances that demand disclosure, and/or regret over decisions to disclose feelings.

These were both looked at as predictors of college adjustment, with the inclusion of chronic pain and psychiatric distress as physical and mental health components of the transition.

Literature Review

Alexithymia

- Research on college adjustment by Kerr, Johnson, Gans, and Krumrine (2004) found that an increased level of alexithymia predicted an increased level of difficulty adjusting to college emotionally.
- Numerous studies have found a connection between alexithymia, chronic health problems, and psychological distress. For example:

Alexithymia and Chronic Pain

Lumley, Asselin and Norman (1997) found alexithymia was higher in individuals with chronic pain than in those without chronic pain.

Other studies looking at chronic pain and alexithymia have shown moderate and significant positive correlations between alexithymia measures and pain intensity and interference (Hosoi et. al, 2010).

Alexithymia and Psychological Distress

Joukamaa, Karlsson, Sohlman, and Lehtinen (1996) found that alexithymia was prevalent in patients that frequently attended doctors appointments who were also experiencing high levels of psychological distress, with 1/3 being characterized as having alexithymia.

Emotional Ambivalence

- There is no prior research directly examining the relationship between emotional ambivalence and college adjustment.
- Emotional ambivalence reflects ongoing internal conflict about the desire to hide emotions, despite external circumstances that demand disclosure, and/or regret over decisions to disclose feelings. Emotional ambivalence has been previously linked to increased symptoms of chronic pain and psychiatric distress (Herbette & Rime, 2004).

Research Question

Research question: Do higher levels of alexithymia and emotional ambivalence predict greater struggles with college adjustment, including higher levels of chronic pain and psychological distress?

Methodology

- Procedure** - This study was survey based. Per IRB approval, after reading the information sheet participants were given a paper survey packet to complete. The surveys were completed in one 75 minute session.
- Sample** - 155 participants from undergraduate psychology classes at a private university in the northeastern U.S The sample was 69% women (31% men). 14.2% of the students were international.

Measures

Alexithymia - The 20- item Toronto Alexithymia Scale-20 (TAS-20; Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994) was used to assess the degree that participants had difficulty identifying and describing their feelings and their externally oriented thinking. Items were rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and summed; higher total scores indicate greater alexithymia.

Emotional ambivalence - The 14- item Ambivalence Over Emotional Expression Questionnaire (AEQ; King & Emmons, 1990) was used to measure the desire to express emotions but conscious inhibition of expression. Items were rated from 1 (I have never felt like this) to 5 (I feel like this a lot) and averaged; higher mean scores indicate greater ambivalence over expressing one's emotions.

College adjustment - The College Adjustment Test (CAT; Pennebaker, Colder & Sharp, 1990) is a 19-item survey which evaluates student thoughts and feelings in regards to the transition to college.

Psychiatric distress - The 23- item DSM-5 Self Rated Level 1 Cross-Cutting Symptom Measure (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) was used to determine the frequency with which a person has experienced symptoms related to 13 psychiatric domains. Items were rated from 0 (none or not at all) to 4 (severe or nearly every day).

Chronic Pain Interference - Four items of the Brief Pain Inventory (Cleeland, 1991) were averaged to give the pain interference subscale. Each item is on a scale of 0 (no interference) to 10 (greatest interference).

Results Continued

Alexithymia

College Adjustment

There was no significant relationship between alexithymia and college adjustment for men. For women, there was a trend, meaning that there may be a significant relationship if sample size were to be increased. As alexithymia increases, the ability to adjust in a college setting is diminished.

Psychiatric Distress

There was no relationship between alexithymia and psychiatric distress for men, however, for women it was shown that an increase in alexithymia correlated with an increase in psychiatric distress.

Chronic Pain Interference

As with the other outcomes, alexithymia was a significant predictor of chronic pain interference for women but not for men in this study.

Emotional Ambivalence

College Adjustment

For men and women there was a relationship between emotional ambivalence and college adjustment, such that emotional ambivalence increases struggles with transitioning into college.

Psychiatric Distress

Men (trend $p < .10$) and women ($p < .01$) both showed a positive relationship between emotional ambivalence and psychiatric distress. Higher emotional ambivalence was related to higher psychiatric distress.

Chronic Pain Interference

The relationship between emotional ambivalence and chronic pain in the form of pain interference is significant among men ($p < .05$), while not for women.

Analyses

Linear regression analyses in which age was controlled and gender was stratified were run (utilizing SPSS). Separate analyses were run for each outcome category (college adjustment, psychiatric distress, and pain interference).

Results

	Psychiatric Distress		Pain Interference		College Adjustment	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Emotional Ambivalence	.36 ^t	.24*	.64**	-.16	-.34 ^t	-.36**
Alexithymia	.04	.38**	.09	.44**	-.25	-.23 ^t

t=trend * = $< .05$ ** = $< .01$

Conclusions

As a whole the results illustrate a link between alexithymia, emotional ambivalence and college adjustment, with both its physical and mental components. While the relationship between emotional ambivalence and the outcomes being studied seem to vary with gender, their link with alexithymia was consistently associated with women. Knowing this, interventions should be made early on in the school year, especially with incoming female freshman, to ascertain whether they may need extra support in their transition to college. This intervention could potentially help with college retention as well. This support should not only be academic but should also target both mental and physical health as both suffered in the presence of alexithymia. This is not to say that men should be ignored when looking at college adjustment, as they also exhibited a relationship, albeit weaker, when it came to emotional ambivalence. Increased education in colleges about communicating emotions could help to diminish this link. Further research should be conducted in order to understand why alexithymia had a greater link with women while emotional ambivalence had a stronger link to the outcomes with men. The findings overall communicate a need for more support in college institutions and early interventions in order to help those that might be at a psychological disadvantage.

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