

Moral decision-making in alexithymic participants

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Moral choices are the result of an interplay between emotion and cognition [1, 2]: emotions usually elicit deontological choices while cognition leads people to make utilitarian choices. Accordingly, patients with emotional deficits give more utilitarian responses compared to healthy controls [3-7]. Recently, studies have shown that this response pattern is present also in individuals with alexithymia [8, 9]. Alexithymia describes a subclinical condition characterized by affect dysregulation and it comprises an affective dimension, the level of subjective emotional experience, and a cognitive dimension, referring to the cognitive control of emotions [10]. The aim of the present study was to investigate the impact of alexithymia on “moral decision making”, taking these two dimensions into account. To this end, we recruited 22 alexithymic participants and 22 non-alexithymic controls, and asked them to perform a moral decision-making task, which consisted in choosing between two solutions of a dilemma and in rating the valence of emotions and arousal elicited by the decision [11]. While participants performed the task, their skin conductance was measured. No differences emerged between alexithymic participants and controls in the percentage of utilitarian answers and decision time. However, alexithymic participants rated as significantly less unpleasant the emotions associated with the decision. Moreover, valence and arousal ratings significantly correlated with the affective component of alexithymia. No significant differences in skin conductance between the two groups were observed. In conclusion, alexithymia seems to influence emotions rising from the moral decision but not the decision itself. In addition, the affective components of alexithymia seems to play an important role in the evaluation of the affective reactions to moral decisions.

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