Alexithymia and Emotional Ambivalence as Predictors of College Adjustment

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Study Overview
The current study evaluated the constructs of alexithymia and emotional ambivalence, regarding their impact on adjustment to college. Alexithymia is an emotional processing concept which is defined as difficulty in 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. Efforts identified alexithymia and emotional ambivalence as predictors of college adjustment, with the inclusion of chronic pain and psychiatric distress as physical and mental health components of the transition.

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; Pembeaker, Corder & 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).

  - 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.

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 freshmen, to prevent them from needing more support in college institutions and early interventions in order to help those that might be at a psychological disadvantage.

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 (Hossi et al., 2010).

  • Alexithymia and Psychiatric Distress
  - Joukamaa, Karlsson, Sohlin, and Lehtinen (1996) found that alexithymia was prevalent in patients who 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).

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).

References:
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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 psychiatric distress?