



# Alexithymia and the implicit self-concept of extraversion in women



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## ABSTRACT

Findings from studies using self-reports suggest a negative association between the personality traits of alexithymia and extraversion. Self-report measures are assumed to assess aspects of the explicit self-concept of personality. Indirect measures, such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT), were developed to tap into the implicit self-concept of personality. The present study examined for the first time the relationship between self-reported alexithymia and the implicit self-concept of extraversion. The 20-item Toronto Alexithymia Scale and an Implicit Association Test (IAT) assessing extraversion were administered to 86 healthy women along with the NEO Five-factor Inventory (NEO-FFI). A significant negative correlation of  $r = -.26$  was found between alexithymia and implicit extraversion that remained significant when controlling for trait anxiety and explicit extraversion. Our study provides first evidence that in individuals with high alexithymia associative representations of the self are less strongly linked to extraversion-related characteristics compared to those with low alexithymia. Our data are consistent with findings demonstrating that alexithymia comes along with social anhedonia, withdrawal, and interpersonal problems.

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## 1. Introduction

Alexithymia is characterized by restrictions in recognizing and verbalizing feelings and the utilization of a cognitive style that is oriented toward external events, rather than intrapsychic experiences (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1991). The construct is viewed as a continuous personality trait (Parker, Keefer, Taylor, & Bagby, 2008) that is normally distributed in the population (Franz et al., 2008). The predominant measure of alexithymia is the 20-item Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20, Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994), a questionnaire with satisfactory psychometric properties (Parker, Taylor, & Bagby, 2003). The TAS-20 encompasses three subscales assessing three latent, relatively independent (Parker et al., 2003) facets of alexithymia: Difficulties Identifying Feelings (DIF), Difficulties Describing Feelings (DDF), and Externally Oriented Thinking (EOT). Alexithymia has been characterized by a lack of emotional abilities (Lumley, Gustavson, Partridge, & Labouvie-Vief, 2005) and is negatively correlated with trait emotional intelligence (Baughman et al., 2011). Alexithymia reflects interindividual differences in the capacity to experience, express and regulate emotions (Bagby & Taylor, 1997). Therefore, investigating associations between alexithymia and distinct, emotion related personality traits could lead to a better understanding of the construct and further evaluation of its validity (Luminet, Bagby, Wagner, Taylor, & Parker, 1999).

Extraversion is a basic dimension of the well-established Five Factor personality model (Digman, 1990; McCrae & John, 1992). High extraversion refers to sociable tendencies, such as talkativeness, cheerfulness and high activity levels (Costa & McCrae, 1980). There is strong evidence for a relation between extraversion and a higher propensity to habitually experience positive affect (Costa & McCrae, 1980; Watson & Clark, 1992). Since emotions seem to play an important role in the conceptualization of extraversion and alexithymia, one might expect at least a weak relationship between those constructs. Parker and Taylor (1997) have pointed out that both traits are conceptually related, as less extraverted individuals and alexithymic individuals share difficulties in the communication of emotions. An ample body of research has demonstrated that high scores in alexithymia are linked to low levels of extraversion and sociability in nonclinical populations (e.g. Luminet et al., 1999; Zimmermann, Rossier, Meyer de Stadelhofen, & Gaillard, 2005). Hence, individuals with deficiencies in recognizing and describing feelings appear to experience less positive affect, to be more reserved, and to engage less in social interactions.

All previous studies in the field administered self-report questionnaires to assess extraversion. These explicit measures require the individual to judge whether statements are characteristic of them and represent their own behavioral tendencies. Direct measures, such as questionnaires, presuppose introspective access to self-related knowledge (Asendorpf, Banske, & Mücke, 2002). However, conscious awareness of one's own cognitive processes that underlie behavior and personality seems restricted (Wilson & Dunn, 2004). Self-report measures are assumed to assess aspects of the explicit self-concept of personality (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2009). These measures reflect individual

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differences in conscious or propositional representations of the self that rely on reflective-reasoning processes. Indirect measures do not ask participants for a verbal report of trait characteristics, but infer self-representations or mental contents from task performance in experimental paradigms (Nosek, Hawkins, & Frazier, 2011). These indirect tests are thought to tap into chronic associative representations of the self, namely the *implicit self-concept of personality* (Asendorpf et al., 2002). According to the behavioral process model of personality (BPMP, Back et al., 2009) the recurrent expression of behaviors that were driven by automatic and impulsive tendencies and motives results in the development of associative self-representations. Whereas social behaviors triggered by typical functioning of more deliberative processes become manifest in the explicit self-concept of personality. Since the duality of the self-concept is a currently accepted model in personality research (e.g., Hirschmüller, Egloff, Nestler, & Back, 2013) and both explicit and implicit self-concepts seem to influence behavior independently (Asendorpf et al., 2002; Back et al., 2009; Egloff & Schmukle, 2002), the administration of direct and indirect measures is promising to increase accurate predictions concerning meaningful differences in how individuals actually behave. A well-known and validated indirect measure is the Implicit Association Test (IAT), introduced by Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz (1998). The IAT assesses the strength of automatic mental associations between target concepts (e.g., “me” and “others”) and attribute dimensions (e.g., “talkative” or “shy”) by comparing performance speed in two word classification tasks.

Individuals high in alexithymia have an impaired ability to elaborate feelings and reduced self-insight and bodily awareness (Herbert, Herbert, & Pollatos, 2011). Such impairments might extend more broadly to self-perceptions with respect to other personality traits, such as extraversion. Hence, indirect measures to assess personality traits could be a promising complement to questionnaires in alexithymia research.

A recent study demonstrated that TAS-20 alexithymia was inversely related to explicit (self-report), but not implicit (IAT) self-esteem (Dentale, San Martini, De Coro, & Di Pomponio, 2010). Interestingly, implicit and explicit measures of self-esteem were moderately correlated with each other only in low alexithymia, but not in high alexithymia. Although not controlled for possible confounding effects of negative affectivity, these findings further emphasize the importance of administering implicit as well as explicit measures in alexithymia.

The aim of the present study was to examine the relationship between alexithymia and the implicit and explicit self-concept of extraversion. To our knowledge, we are the first to administer an indirect measure of extraversion to investigate associations with alexithymia. It was expected that indirectly and directly measured extraversion are negatively correlated with alexithymic characteristics.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Participants

Our sample included 86 healthy women. There is evidence that gender moderates associations between explicit and implicit measures (Donges, Jachmann, Kersting, Egloff, & Suslow, 2015; Egloff & Schmukle, 2004). Women seem to manifest stronger relations between both types of measures. Participants' mean age was 23.92 years ( $SD = 3.12$ , range: 19–30). All participants were native German speakers and had no history of neurological or psychiatric diseases. They did not use psychotropic medication according to self-report. Telephone-interviews were conducted to exclude lifetime diagnosis of Major Depression based on the unipolar depression module of the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV Axis I disorders (SCID-I, Wittchen, Wunderlich, Gruschwitz, & Zaudig, 1997). Scores  $\geq 14$  on the revised Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II) indicate mild or stronger depressive symptoms and were an exclusion criterion for study participation. Participants were recruited via online advertisement in social networks and public notices that were posted in canteens, libraries and notice boards of the University.

The mean duration of the participants' school education was 12.34 years ( $SD = 0.61$ ). The study was approved by the local ethics committee. After a detailed explanation of the study, written informed consent was obtained from all participants and they received financial compensation after completion of all tasks.

### 2.2. Psychometric measures

Alexithymia was measured by the TAS-20 (German version: Bach, Bach, de Zwaan, Serim, & Böhmer, 1996). The TAS-20 consists of three subscales: Difficulties Identifying Feelings (DIF), Difficulties Describing Feelings (DDF), and Externally Oriented Thinking (EOT). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”). In the present sample Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .80 for the TAS-20 total scale, .71 for DIF, .81 for DDF and .65 for EOT. Internal consistencies were comparable to those reported in other studies (Bach et al., 1996; Bagby et al., 1994). Low reliability of EOT has been described previously (Franz et al., 2008).

Severity of depressive symptoms and levels of anxiety were assessed with the revised version of the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II, Hautzinger, Keller, & Kühner, 2009) and the trait version of the State-trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI, Laux, Glanzmann, Schaffner, & Spielberger, 1981). Verbal intelligence was determined by means of the Mehrfachwahl-Wortschatz-Intelligenztest (MWT-B), a multiple choice test using artificial and existent vocabulary of the German language (Lehrl, 2005).

As an explicit measure of extraversion the NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI, Borkenau & Ostendorf, 2008) was administered. The NEO-FFI is a self-report questionnaire consisting of 60 items that assess dimensions of normal personality. The NEO-FFI has five subscales, each comprised of 12 items, assessing neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness.

To assess the implicit self-concept of extraversion the IAT was administered. The extraversion IAT is a well-validated indirect measure that was shown to have satisfactory internal consistency (Back et al., 2009; Schmukle, Back, & Egloff, 2008). Stimuli were presented on a 17-in monitor. Inquisit 3 (Draine, 2004) was used to control stimulus presentation and to record task performance. Responses were given on a keyboard with the left (“Q” button) and right (“P” button) index finger. A detailed description of the IAT procedure has already been published (Suslow, Lindner, Kugel, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2014) – see our Supplemental material for a brief illustration of the IAT.

Initially, participants were informed that they would be required to make a series of category judgments as accurate, though as quickly as possible. On each trial, single-word items were presented in the center of the screen and participants were instructed to assign the stimulus to the correspondent category. Words were presented for the discrimination of the target concept “me” (*me, my, own, I, self*) vs. “others” (*they, your, them, you, others*) and for the discrimination of the attribute concept “extraversion” (*sociable, talkative, active, impulsive, outgoing*) vs. “introversion” (*shy, reticent, passive, deliberate, reserved*). The IAT consisted of five blocks including three practice and two critical blocks. Blocks 3 and 5 are the critical blocks in which participants were required to differentiate between target words of two combined categories, each including the attribute and the target concept that were assigned to the same key. In Block 3 (me + extraversion block) the target concept category “me” and the attribute concept category “extraversion” were assigned to the left key, whereas “others” and “introversion” were assigned to the right key. In Block 5 (me + introversion block) the assignment of the attribute concept categories “extraversion” vs. “introversion” was inverted, so “me” and “introversion” were combined on the left key, and “others” and “extraversion” were combined for the right key.

Following the standard computation method of recent studies (Back et al., 2009; Donges et al., 2015; Suslow et al., 2014) IAT data were treated by using the improved  $D_1$  scoring algorithm (Greenwald,

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