



Seeing mixed emotions: Alexithymia, emotion perception bias, and quality in dyadic interactions[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Alexithymia, the difficulty in identifying and describing emotions, has been found to contribute to problems in dyadic interactions and relationships. We studied the association between alexithymic tendencies, emotion perception biases and the quality of naturally occurring dyadic interactions. Participants completed the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS), the Assessment of Contextualized Emotions, a laboratory task that assesses accuracy and bias (perceiving emotions additional to those communicated) in emotion perception, and the Faces part of the Mayer Salovey and Caruso Emotional intelligence Test followed by a 10-day event sampling study of the quality of their naturally occurring social interactions. The Difficulties in Identifying Feelings (DIF) subscale of the TAS was negatively related to all indices of quality of social interaction. DIF was positively and moderately strongly correlated with bias in emotion perception, and importantly, bias in emotion perception in the ACE-faces task mediated DIF effects on social interaction outcomes. Perceiving emotions additional to those communicated as measured in the ACE task is an important aspect of alexithymic tendencies and their effects on dyadic interactions.

1. Alexithymia, emotion perception bias, and quality in dyadic interactions

Alexithymia is a central personality construct that pertains to impaired abilities in experiencing and processing emotion, and is normally distributed in the population (Franz et al., 2008). The term literary means “absence of words for emotion” and refers to problems to understand and process emotion, to communicate emotions to others, and to comprehend peoples' internal motivations as well as difficulty in identifying own feelings, due to an “external” processing of events and behaviors (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997). Much of the research on alexithymia has focused on the psychological and physiological consequences of alexithymia. Yet, in recent years interest in the interpersonal consequences of alexithymia has increased (Foran & O'Leary, 2012; Grynberg et al., 2012; Vanheule, Desmet, Meganck, & Bogaerts, 2007). This interest is very much in tune with Sifneos' (1973) original observations that people with alexithymia show patterns of interpersonal interactions that are distant, withdrawn, and aloof. The present study relates emotion processing biases associated with

alexithymia to people's experience of real-life interactions.

2. The interpersonal consequences of Alexithymia

Vanheule et al. (2007) found alexithymia to be associated with a number of interpersonal problems in a general (student) and a clinical-outpatients sample. In particular, alexithymia was associated with being cold or distant in interpersonal relationships and feeling socially inhibited in social interactions. Alexithymia was also found to contribute to lower social support (Humphreys, Wood, & Parker, 2009) and lower affection for others (Hesse & Floyd, 2011a). Alexithymia was associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Humphreys et al., 2009) in dating students, and this association was not mediated by negative affect, a finding that points to the cognitive consequences of alexithymia. In short, alexithymia has been consistently shown to contribute to problems in social and personal relationships.

Yet, much of this research is based on cross-sectional self-report studies which aggregate over experiences and do not allow to identify the exact processes responsible for the suggested linkage. Two studies

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have examined the interpersonal effects of alexithymia in real-time interactions. People who interacted with a member of the opposite sex higher in alexithymia reported being less attracted to them physically, socially, and in terms of the task at hand (Hesse & Floyd, 2011b). People with alexithymia were perceived as behaving in a less positive, intimate, or socially desirable manner, suggesting that alexithymia is associated with limitations in communication, which, in turn, can lead to relational difficulties. A daily diary study of dating couples found, especially men's, alexithymia to predict their partners' lower social support and intimacy, factors which further predicted partners' depressive symptoms (Foran & O'Leary, 2012). The authors theorized that persons with alexithymia do not use emotional information effectively, especially when stressed. Indeed, there is strong evidence that alexithymia is associated with lower empathy (Grynberg, Luminet, Corneille, Grèzes, & Berthoz, 2010; Moriguchi et al., 2007).

Taken together, the evidence suggests that alexithymia is associated with less emotional attunement in social interactions. The present study extends this work by examining how deficits in the accurate decoding of facial emotion expressions associated with alexithymia may account for deficits in real life social interactions. The accurate perception of facial emotion expressions in human interactions is very important for the regulation of emotion and the quality of social and personal relationships (Fischer & Manstead, 2008).

3. Alexithymia and emotion perception

Both in the general and in clinical populations individuals with high levels of alexithymia are less able to recognize emotional states (Parker, Taylor, & Bagby, 1993; Prkachin, Casey, & Prkachin, 2009). Yet, there are also studies that have found no significant differences in decoding accuracy for posed emotions as a function of alexithymia (McDonald & Prkachin, 1990). A recent review (Grynberg et al., 2012) concludes that there is “a consistent relationship between alexithymia and the abilities to decode others' emotions” (p. 14) and that alexithymia impairments are global, that is, they do not pertain to specific facial expressions of positive or negative emotions. However, the exact nature of why and how alexithymia is associated with inaccuracy in the perception of facial emotion expressions is unknown.

Grynberg et al. (2012) conclude that people higher in alexithymia (HA) “may not be impaired in detecting, matching, or even labeling EFes [Expressions of Facial Emotions] *per se*. Instead, HA may have deficits in processing the perceptual properties of EFes” (p. 14). There is evidence that individuals high in alexithymia have weaker perceptual representations of facial emotion expressions (Reker et al., 2010). In the same vein, Nook, Lindquist, and Zaki (2015) found that HA had problems to accurately detect emotion expressions based on facial visual stimuli but not when emotion labels were provided. In a clinical study individuals with severe alexithymia - although able to distinguish different facial expressions - were unable to consistently label the emotions depicted (Cook, Brewer, Shah, & Bird, 2013). Taken together, there is emerging evidence suggesting that conceptual processes of mislabeling emotion may be responsible for emotion perception biases found in alexithymia.

Therefore, classic methods of emotion perception detection may not be best suited to tap higher alexithymia deficiencies in emotion perception. This is because of the nature of the task and the type of information provided: posed expressions taken out of context to which one label from a given list has to be affixed. Accuracy in this task is defined as the ability to associate the “correct” label to the single emotion expression shown without social context (e.g., Ekman & Friesen, 1976;). However, the social context of emotion perception is important for the correct attribution of emotion labels and for emotion perception accuracy (Hess & Hareli, 2015). Observers tend to see *multiple emotions* even when judging emotional expressions considered to be “pure” (Yrizarry, Matsumoto, & Wilson-Cohn, 1998). This is especially the case in naturally occurring social interactions where people

are likely to show subtle expressions that are open to different interpretations (Motley & Camden, 1988). Further, the presence of other persons during emotion perception, which is typical for everyday interactions, can also influence the emotion perception process (Masuda et al., 2008).

The present research tested the association between alexithymia and emotion perception using a novel test of contextualized emotion perception. The ACE (Assessment of Contextualized Emotions-faces), assesses both **accuracy** (perceiving the emotions communicated) and **bias** (perceiving emotions additional to those communicated), which constitute two distinct facets of emotion decoding with unique effects for dyadic interaction outcomes (Hess, Kafetsios, Mauersberger, Blaison, & Kessler, 2016). Research from our own labs has pointed to *social-contextual factors that can influence the accurate perception of emotion expressions*. For example, cultural emotion norms and the priming of relational or interdependent self-orientations impact attending to the social context of emotion expression and the accurate perception of emotion expressions (Hess, Blaison, & Kafetsios, 2016; Kafetsios & Hess, 2013, 2015). Interestingly, Konrath, Grynberg, Corneille, Hammig, and Luminet (2011) found higher interdependence to be associated with higher alexithymia, suggesting that the two constructs may share similar biases in contextualized emotion perception.

The present research assessed relationships between alexithymic tendencies in identifying emotions, bias and accuracy in the ACE-faces task, and the quality of naturally occurring dyadic interactions. The ACE allowed us to assess different perceptual processes involved in the decoding accuracy of facial emotion expressions, and their consequences for the seamless functioning of interpersonal interactions. Following Nook et al. (2015) we maintain that conceptual processing is significantly involved in persons' with alexithymia impairment in emotion perception. Based on Nook et al. (2015) and Konrath et al. (2011), we expected that higher alexithymia will be associated with more bias when the opportunity to mislabel emotion is greater. The study reported here was part of a larger project focusing on the impact of emotion communication ability on everyday interactions (Hess, Kafetsios, et al., 2016). The individual differences analyses reported here have not been reported elsewhere.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

One hundred and eight participants (26 men) from a large state university in Germany completed all parts of the study. A further 52 persons participated in the laboratory study, but did not return their diaries or had to be excluded due to equipment malfunction. Participants received a small gift (wellness products, chocolates, etc.) in recognition. Participant age ranged from 18 to 40 years ($M = 25.87$, $SD = 5.04$).

4.2. Measures

Participants completed a number of individual differences scales (described in Hess, Kafetsios, et al., 2016, Study 3). Analyses for the present study revolve around the following:

The **Toronto alexithymia scale** (Taylor, Ryan, & Bagby, 1985) is a widely used measure that taps three dimensions: Difficulty Identifying Feelings (DIF), Difficulty Describing Feelings (DDF), Externally-Oriented Thinking (EOT). The German translation of the 26-item scale was used (Kupfer, Brosig, & Brähler, 2001).

The **Faces section of the Mayer, Salovey, Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test** (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2003) where participants report on the emotional content of each subtly emotional face by rating the degree of happiness, fear, surprise, disgust, and excitement on a 5-point scale (1 = no emotion and 5 = extreme amount

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