

## ALEXITHYMIA AS A PREDICTOR OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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### Abstract

*Aim of the current study is to explore the predictive relationship of alexithymia and its components with interpersonal relationships in young adults. Further to investigate the gender differences on these variables. It was hypothesized that different components of alexithymia (Difficulty Identifying Feelings, Difficulty Describing Feelings, and Extremely Oriented Thinking) would have significant relationship with interpersonal relationships in young adults. Further, components of alexithymia would have predictive relationship with the interpersonal relationships in young adults. Further, there would be gender differences in alexithymia and interpersonal relationships in young adults. For conduction of this study a random sample of 300 young adults (with equal gender ratio) age range between 15-25 was taken from different academic institutes of Sialkot. A self-developed demographic sheet along with Toronto Alexithymia Scale Urdu version (TAS-20; Bagby et al., 2020) and the Interpersonal Relationships Questionnaire-Short form (FIAT-Q-SF; Darrow et al., 2014) were administered. For results, descriptive analysis, pearson product moment correlation, linear regression analysis and t-test were applied. The findings indicated that components of alexithymia have significant positive relationship with interpersonal relations ( $p < 0.05$ ) and these components have potential to predict interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, results revealed significant mean differences on the study variables in males and females.*

**Keywords:** Alexithymia, DDF, DIF, EOT and interpersonal relationships.

### INTRODUCTION

Alexithymia is a known as a state in which a person has difficulty in identifying and explaining his/her feelings and shows externally focused thinking style (Apfel & Sifneos, 1979). Alexithymic people are socially isolated who have a small social network and typically use various defense mechanisms to avoid confrontation by submitting to others demands and rights while disregarding their own. This causes interpersonal issues in the relationships of young adults (Zarei & Besharat, 2010). The study looked at the connections between young adults' interpersonal relationships and the elements of alexithymia. According to some researchers it is a condition in which a person struggles to recognize, understand, and communicate his/her feelings. Despite the fact that it may coexist with some mental health issues, it is not a clinical diagnosis and is not regarded as an illness by mental health specialists (Hogeveen & Grafman, 2021).

Social ties, linkages, or affiliations between two or more individuals are known as interpersonal relationships. Their varying degrees of intimacy and sharing suggest the finding or creating of common ground, and they could be based on a shared interest. Although interpersonal interactions need a certain amount of interdependence, persons in these relationships frequently have an impact on one another moods, thoughts, behaviors, and activities (Fincham, 2010).

Interpersonal relationships are based on interpersonal connections that are built by the involvement of two or more people and can be founded in a variety of reasons, including love

and solidarity. Although the foundations of interpersonal relationships can take many different forms, they are primarily based on social, cultural, familial, or kinship ties (as well as other types of social links). One of the most rewarding and abundant aspects of life is the psychology of interpersonal interactions. Since humans are social animals, they yearn to interact with people and experience a sense of dependency (Alexandru, 2022).

Interpersonal relationships can also be viewed as psychological qualities or abilities that result in psychosocial outcomes (Anushiya and Shalini, 2023). According to Paulhus and Martin (1988) interpersonal interactions are the relationships we have with our friends, family, and social group. Interpersonal relationships are essential for both survival and the growth of the cognitive and social faculties. Close relationships provide a sense of safety, acceptance, and validation, reducing stress, loneliness, and the likelihood of developing depression and anxiety (Zomer, 2012). Emotions have the capacity to alert people, shield them from harm, and assist them in accomplishing their objectives (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999; Lazarus, 1984; Slaski & Cartwright, 2003).

The entire experience of alexithymia is influenced by the interaction between the three elements (behavioral, cognitive, and affective). Emotional issues, for instance, might make it harder to comprehend and absorb emotional information which can have an impact on behavior and interpersonal interactions. Alexithymia and interpersonal relations have a complicated reciprocal relationship that influences each other in a number of ways (Ghiabi & Besharat, 2011).

The hallmark of alexithymia is trouble naming and expressing feelings. This deficiency may make it more difficult to properly express emotions in interpersonal relationships. This could result in miscommunications or make it harder to build strong relationships. People who have alexithymia may find it difficult to develop strong emotional connections because of their restricted emotional expression and awareness. It may be difficult for them to grow close and intimate which could negatively impact the quality of their interpersonal relationships (Montebarocci et al., 2004).

A study was conducted on the university students to determine the effects of alexithymia on interpersonal interactions and findings concluded that individuals suffering from alexithymia have difficulty in identifying, expressing and understanding of emotions that can harm the interpersonal relationships (Matias et al., 2023). Another study has showed the consistent findings that greater levels of alexithymia were associated with lower emotional intelligence and more interpersonal relationship problems, suggesting that alexithymia may hinder social functioning and emotional regulation in social situations (Hintistan & Uzun, 2019).

Another study examined the association between interpersonal relationships and a teenage sample with alexithymia, a cognitive and affective deficit in comprehending, regulating, and verbalizing emotions. The results demonstrated a considerable correlation between alexithymia and interpersonal problems in teenage population who are highly alexitymic displaying much more interpersonal issues than those who are not (Puscasu & Usaci, 2016).

Existing research has largely relied on descriptive or correlational designs only few studies employed the predictive analysis to determine that to which extent alexithymia can predict the interpersonal relationship. The present study addressed these gaps for better understanding of this phenomenon.

### **Hypotheses:**

Following hypotheses have been formulated:

1. The different components of alexithymia (Difficulty Identifying Feelings, Difficulty Describing Feelings, and Externally Oriented Thinking) would have significant relationship with interpersonal relationships in young adults.

2. The components of alexithymia would predict the interpersonal relationships in young adults.
3. There would be gender differences in alexithymia & its components and interpersonal relationships in young adults.

## **METHOD**

### **Sample**

A convenient sample of 300 young adults (150 men, 150 women) with the mean age = 17,  $SD = 2.6$  was taken from different schools, colleges and universities and different residential backgrounds such as rural and urban areas of Sialkot, Pakistan. Their minimum level of education was intermediate and they belong to upper, middle and lower socioeconomic status.

### **Instruments**

The following instruments were used in the study.

#### **Self-Develop Demographic sheet**

Demographic variables were comprise of i.e., name, age, gender, education level, socioeconomic status, family setup, relationships with parents, relationships with family members and relationships with friends etc.

#### **The Toronto Alexithymia Scale (Bagby et al., 2020)**

It is a 5 pint likert type scale consisting 20 items. It has three sub-scales i.e., difficulty describing feelings, externally-oriented thinking, and difficulty identifying feelings. For the current study its Urdu version translated by Ghayas et al., (2017) was used . It has a strong reliability of .82.

#### **Interpersonal Relationships Questionnaire-Short form FIAT-Q-SF (Darrow et al. 2014)**

It is comprised of 32 items and a 6-point Likert scale. It was designed to help identify specific issues or areas that clients needed to focus on. One part of this is looking at how they endorsed questions in relation to their experiences. Generally speaking, higher ratings indicate more problems in that area. It has a Cronbach's alpha of .77. for the current study it was translated in Urdu through MAPI guidelines. Its cronbach's alpha of the scale for current study was .70.

### **Procedure**

All necessary permissions were sought from the University's committees. Prior to data collection, permission to use the research instruments, including The Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), the Functional Idiographic Assessment Template Questionnaire – Short Form (FIATQ-SF) for evaluating relationships, was obtained from their respective authors through email. Additionally, permission for data collection was sought from the university's governing authority. Participants were approached and informed consent was taken in written from the participants. Furthermore, participants were assured that their data will remain confidential and solely used for research purposes. The data was collected from different educational centers of Sialkot city including Government College Women University, University of Management and Technology, The Learning Zone School, Government school for boys, Government School for girls, Apex College and Murray College. Nineteen of the 339 questionnaires that were collected had missing responses, incomplete parts, and inconsistent data, so 39 forms were discarded. The final 300 participants' data were gathered. After data collection proposed statistical analysis were applied through SPSS.

## RESULTS

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the current Sample (N=300)**

Variables	Mean ( <i>SD</i> )	n (%)
Age	17.97 (2.67)	
Gender of respondents		
Male		150 (50%)
Female		150 (50%)
Family setup		
Nuclear		215 (71.7%)
Joint		81 (27%)
Education		
Matric		117 (39%)
Intermediate		93 (31%)
Graduation		90 (30%)
Socioeconomic status		
Lower class		3 (1%)
Middle class		277 (92.3%)
Upper class		20 (6.7%)
Residential area		
Urban		176 (58.7%)
Rural		124 (41.3%)

**Note:** The table shows the details of demographic variables. The mean age is 17.9years (SD= 2.67). The gender distribution is equal. The majority of participants are from nuclear families (71%). Majority of the participants have finished matriculation. Based on socioeconomic status, the majority belong to the middle class families. Most of the people (58%) are from urban areas. Majority of respondents say that they have congenial relationships with their parents, (77%) with family and (83%) with friends

**Table 2: Reliability Coefficient and Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables**

Variables	<i>k</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>	Range	
					Potential	Actual
Alexithymia	20	57.57	13.05	.65	20-100	39-81
Difficulty Describing Feelings	5	14.32	3.98	.69	5-25	9-22
Difficulty Identifying Feelings	7	19.00	7.86	.67	7-35	7-33

Externally Oriented Thinking	8	24.24	4.29	.71	8-40	13-35
<b>Interpersonal Relationships</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>111.7</b>	<b>19.8</b>	<b>.64</b>	<b>32-192</b>	<b>67-169</b>

**Note:** The table represents the study variables, such as alexithymia, its sub-scales and interpersonal relationships, along with their psychometric characteristics. The findings show that the majority of variables have moderate to high reliability which is consistent with the measures that were employed. While the actual score ranges show sample variability, the potential score ranges are consistent with the construct's theoretical framework. These results imply that the instruments well represented the concepts of relationship dynamics and emotional processing offering insightful information about the participant's interpersonal and psychological characteristics

**Table 3: Mean, Standard deviation and Pearson Product Moment Correlation of Alexithymia and its sub-scales with interpersonal relationships (N=300).**

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Alexithymia</b>	57.57	13.05	-	.929**	.902**	.526**	.581**
Difficulty Describing Feelings (DDF)	14.32	3.98	-	-	.833**	.372**	.545**
Difficulty Identifying Feelings (DIF)	19.00	7.86	-	-	-	.140*	.595**
Externally Orientated Thinking. (EOT)	24.24	4.29	-	-	-	-	.172**
<b>Interpersonal relationships</b>	111.73	19.84	-	-	-	-	-

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Note:** The results from the above table has revealed that alexithymia and its sub-scales i.e., difficulty describing feelings and difficulty identifying feelings show moderate significant positive correlation with interpersonal relationships ( $r = .581^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), ( $r = .545^{**}$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ), ( $.595^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) respectively. While sub-scale of externally oriented thinking shows significant weak positive relationship with interpersonal relations ( $r = .172^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis of Alexithymia & its components and Interpersonal Relationships (N=300).**

Independent Variables	Dependant Variable	B	$\beta$	SE	t	p	95%CI Lower / Upper
<b>Alexythemia</b>	Interpersonal Relationships	.883	.581	16.17	12.33	.000	.742, 1.024
R <sup>2</sup>	.338						
$\Delta R^2$	.336						



<b>Difficulty Describing Feelings</b>	Interpersonal Relationships	2.71	.545	16.65	11.23	.000	2.239, 3.190
R <sup>2</sup>	.297						
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.295						
<b>Difficulty Identifying Feelings</b>	Interpersonal Relationships	1.502	.595	15.97	12.78	.000	1.271, 1.733
R <sup>2</sup>	.354						
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.352						
<b>Externally Oriented Thinking</b>	Interpersonal Relationships	.793	.172	19.51	3.01	.000	.275, 1.312
R <sup>2</sup>	.030						
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.026						

Dependant Variable: Interpersonal Relationships

Independent Variables: Alexythemia, Difficulty describing feelings, difficulty identifying feelings, externally oriented thinking.

**Note:** The findings of table 4 indicates that the model is statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). The table shows that alexithymia has potential ( $\Delta R^2 = .33\%$ ) to predict interpersonal relationships which shows as alexithymia increases by 1 unit it brings 33% change in the outcome variable. Further, difficulty describing feelings (DDF) has potential to predict interpersonal relationships ( $\Delta R^2 = .29\%$ ) that shows as DDF increases by 1 unit it brings change in interpersonal relationships by 29%. Furthermore findings indicates that difficulty identifying feelings (DIF) and externally oriented thinking (EOT) have potential to predict the interpersonal relations ( $\Delta R^2 = .25\%$ ) and ( $\Delta R^2 = .02\%$ ) which shows as DIF and EOT increase by 1 unit, they bring 25 times and 02 times change in the interpersonal relationships respectively.

**Table 5: Mean Differences in Alexithymia & its Components and Interpersonal Relationships across gender (Male=150, Female=150).**

Variables	Men		Women		t(300)	Sig
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Alexithymia	57.90	13.53	57.24	12.60	.437	.662
Difficulty Describing Feelings	14.27	3.84	14.37	4.13	-.217	.828
Difficulty Identifying Feelings	19.76	8.20	18.25	7.45	1.66	.097
Externally Oriented Thinking	23.86	4.54	24.61	4.01	1.50	.133
Interpersonal Relationships	115.1	14.31	108.37	23.71	2.97	.003

***P.>0.05, P>0.01***

**Note:** findings of the table 5 reveals that no significant differences were found in males and females on the model variables. Hence, significant differences in mean scores were found in males and females on the model variables. As male score slightly higher than females on alexithymia (M=57.90, 57.24) and its components; difficulty identifying feelings (M=19.76, 18.25) and interpersonal relationships (M=115.1, 108.37). Hence, females show slightly higher mean scores on difficulty describing feelings (M=14.37, 14.27) and externally oriented thinking (M=24.61, 23.86) as compared to males.

### DISCUSSION

This section highlights important study findings of significant relationship among adults on the variables of alexithymia, its components and interpersonal relationships among young adults. Further to explore gender differences on the study variables.

According to the first hypothesis of the study, interpersonal connections are linked to the elements of alexithymia, such as difficulty identifying feelings (DIF), difficulty describing feelings (DDF), and externally-oriented thinking (EOT). The current study's findings are significantly supported by the first hypothesis of the study which indicates that the difficulty in identifying feelings, difficulty describing feelings and externally oriented thinking play an important role in interpersonal relationships and show significant positive relationship with interpersonal relationships. On the basis of analysis, it is considered that the increase in alexithymia can lead towards the increase of interpersonal relationship problems. The emotional detachment that often complements alexithymia can make it difficult for alexithemic person to form a deep emotional relationship with others (Finkenauer et al., 2002). Another study indicated that interpersonal relationship issues were associated to higher levels of alexithymia, which shows that alexithymia may interfere with social functioning of the individuals. (Hintistan & Uzun, 2019).

The research further investigated the second hypothesis of the study that the components of alexithymia predict the interpersonal relationships; the findings showed that alexithymia had a noteworthy influence on relational dynamics. Regression analysis results indicated that the model is statistically significant moreover, different sub-scales of alexithymia had varying degrees of influence when it came to predicting interpersonal relationships. These findings are well supported by the previous researches which indicated that DDF, DIF and EOT have positive relationship with interpersonal relationships. The study suggests that difficulty in recognizing one's own emotions have a significant impact on interpersonal relationships which can further complicate or hinder in establishing and sustaining healthy relationships.

The conclusion is supported by the earlier research that associates emotional detachment and communication breakdowns with higher difficulty in identifying feelings scores (Parker et al., 2001; Finkenauer et al., 2002).

The finding of the third hypothesis have highlighted although the insignificant relationship in males and females on study variables, hence, significant mean differences were found in males and females in different components and interpersonal relationships. indicating that gender has no influence on difficulty with emotional awareness, expression, and externally orientated thinking. However, notable gender differences were noted in interpersonal relationships. On average, men reported slightly higher interpersonal relationship scores than women, suggesting that they had comparatively fewer relational problems. The wider range of female scores indicates that women's experiences with interpersonal interactions vary more, with some having more severe challenges.

### Conclusion

The results of current studies represents that the alexithymia is characterized by three primary components: externally-oriented thinking (EOT), trouble describing feelings (DDF), and

difficulty identifying feelings (DIF). Affect a person's capacity to comprehend, communicate, and control their emotions. It becomes difficult for someone to communicate effectively in relationships when they have trouble recognizing emotions and have an externally orientated way of thinking. Also higher levels of alexithymia were observed in those who face more challenges in creating and keeping meaningful connections, possibly due to their difficulties in identifying. As a result, misunderstandings and emotional distance may arise, potentially leading to dissatisfaction and conflict within close relationships.

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