

Examining the Association between Alexithymia and the Big Five Personality Traits

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Abstract:

This study explores the relationship between alexithymia and the Big Five Personality Traits, exploring their implications for emotional processing and personality functioning. Alexithymia, characterized by difficulties in identifying and expressing emotions, has been a subject of significant interest in psychological research. The Big Five Personality Traits: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness, are widely recognized as a comprehensive model for understanding individual differences in personality, by providing a comprehensive overview of existing literature on alexithymia, including its prevalence, measurement, and association with emotional processing. It also discusses the significance of the Big Five Personality Traits in personality psychology.

Keywords: Alexithymia; Big Five Personality Traits; Emotional Processing; Emotional Awareness; Personality Functioning.

1- Introduction

Alexithymia, a term coined by Sifneos in 1973, refers to a personality trait characterized by difficulties in recognizing, identifying, and expressing emotions. This emotional processing deficit can have significant implications for mental health, interpersonal relationships, and overall well-being (Sifneos, 1973; Taylor et al., 1990). Conversely, personality traits are fundamental aspects of an individual's psychological makeup that influence their behaviors, thoughts, and emotional experiences (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The Big Five Personality Traits, also known as the Five-Factor Model, include Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism, and are widely recognized as fundamental dimensions of human personality (John & Srivastava, 1999).

Understanding the interplay between alexithymia and the Big Five Personality Traits is of great interest in personality psychology and emotional processing research. Exploring how alexithymia may relate to specific personality dimensions can provide

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valuable insights into emotional regulation, interpersonal behavior, and psychological functioning. By comprehensively reviewing the existing literature, this paper aims to examine the relationship between alexithymia and each of the Big Five Personality Traits, shedding light on the complexities of emotional awareness and expression in individuals with alexithymic tendencies.

Previous research has extensively investigated the association between alexithymia and emotional processing deficits. Alexithymic individuals are often characterized by reduced emotional awareness, difficulty verbalizing emotions, and a tendency to focus on external events rather than internal feelings (Bagby et al., 1994; Grynberg et al., 2012). These difficulties may lead to challenges in interpersonal relationships, as alexithymic individuals may struggle to empathize with others and communicate their emotional experiences effectively (Bird et al., 2010; Grynberg et al., 2012). Additionally, alexithymia has been linked to a higher prevalence of mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, and somatic complaints (Honkalampi et al., 2000; Porcelli et al., 2011). Understanding the emotional processing deficits associated with alexithymia is crucial for contextualizing its relationship with personality traits.

The Five-Factor Model has been widely studied and validated across different cultures and populations. Each personality trait plays a unique role in shaping emotional expression and interpersonal behaviors. For instance, individuals high in Extraversion tend to be outgoing and emotionally expressive, whereas those high in Neuroticism often experience heightened emotional reactivity and negative affect (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Personality traits like Agreeableness may influence the ability to understand and respond to others' emotional needs (LaFrance & Banaji, 1992). Conscientious individuals may show greater emotional regulation and emotional stability (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Openness to experience could potentially influence the depth of emotional experiences and their expression (DeYoung, 2010). Investigating how these personality dimensions interact with alexithymia can provide a comprehensive understanding of emotional processing and expression.

2. Alexithymia: Understanding Definitions, Symptoms, and Types

2.1 Definition of alexithymia:

Alexithymia, a term derived from the Greek words "a" (lack) and "lexis" (words), is a multifaceted construct that refers to difficulties in recognizing, understanding, and expressing emotions. First introduced by Sifneos in 1973, alexithymia has since been extensively researched in various populations and clinical settings. This section provides an in-depth examination of alexithymia, encompassing its definitions, symptoms, and various types, shedding light on its complex nature and impact on emotional processing.

Over the years, researchers and clinicians have proposed different definitions and conceptualizations of alexithymia. Some define it as an inability to identify and differentiate emotions, while others emphasize the lack of emotional self-awareness and difficulty putting feelings into words (Nemiah et al., 1976; Taylor et al., 1991). Additionally, some perspectives suggest that alexithymia involves impaired emotional imagination, affecting the capacity to understand emotional experiences (Lane et al., 2015). This section presents a comprehensive review of these diverse definitions, offering insights into the evolution of the concept and its core characteristics.

2.2 Symptoms of Alexithymia:

Alexithymia is associated with a cluster of symptoms that can significantly impact emotional functioning. Common symptoms include difficulty identifying and describing emotions, a preference for focusing on external stimuli rather than internal feelings, and limited capacity for emotional fantasizing (Bagby et al., 1994; Taylor et al., 1999). Furthermore, alexithymic individuals may have challenges distinguishing between physical sensations and emotional experiences (Kano et al., 2003). This segment delves into the different facets of alexithymia, providing a comprehensive overview of its symptoms and their implications.

Alexithymia is associated with a cluster of symptoms that can significantly impact emotional functioning and interpersonal interactions:

- a) **Difficulty Identifying Emotions:** One of the hallmark symptoms of alexithymia is the difficulty in identifying and distinguishing emotions. Individuals with alexithymia may struggle to recognize and label their own feelings, leading to a sense of emotional disconnection and confusion (Lane et al., 2015).
- b) **Difficulty Describing Emotions:** Alongside identifying emotions, individuals with alexithymia may also find it challenging to articulate and put their emotional experiences into words. They might resort to vague descriptions or rely on physical sensations to express what they are feeling (Bagby et al., 1994).
- c) **Limited Fantasy and Imagination:** Alexithymic individuals often exhibit a reduced capacity for emotional fantasizing and imaginative thinking. They might have difficulty envisioning alternative emotional scenarios or experiences (Lane et al., 2015).
- d) **Externally Oriented Thinking:** A significant characteristic of alexithymia is a tendency to focus on external events and stimuli rather than one's internal emotional experiences. This external orientation may lead to difficulties in introspecting or understanding emotional motivations (Taylor et al., 1999).

- e) **Impaired Emotional Awareness:** Alexithymia can lead to diminished emotional awareness and insight. Individuals may not realize the emotional impact of certain events or experiences, leading to difficulties in understanding their emotional responses (Kano et al., 2003).

These symptoms are not mutually exclusive, and individuals with alexithymia may experience various combinations of these features. The presence of these symptoms can significantly affect emotional regulation, interpersonal communication, and overall well-being. Recognizing these symptoms is crucial for the accurate assessment and appropriate interventions for individuals with alexithymia.

2.3 Types of Alexithymia:

Alexithymia is typically classified into two primary types: Primary Alexithymia and Secondary Alexithymia.

a) Primary Alexithymia:

This type refers to individuals who have inherent difficulties in recognizing, identifying, and expressing emotions from an early age. It is considered as a stable personality trait that persists across various situations and life stages (Taylor et al., 1999). People with primary alexithymia often exhibit limited emotional awareness and tend to focus on external events rather than their internal emotional experiences. This inherent emotional processing deficit can affect their ability to understand and empathize with others, leading to challenges in interpersonal relationships.

b) Secondary Alexithymia:

In contrast to primary alexithymia, secondary alexithymia is acquired and develops in response to external factors such as traumatic experiences or certain medical conditions (Bach et al., 2015). Individuals who experience significant emotional distress, chronic stress, or trauma may develop secondary alexithymia as a coping mechanism to protect themselves from overwhelming emotions. In this case, emotional shutdown or detachment becomes a defense mechanism, resulting in difficulties in recognizing and expressing emotions.

It is essential to differentiate between primary and secondary alexithymia, as their underlying causes and implications for psychological well-being may vary. Understanding the different types of alexithymia contributes to a more nuanced understanding of emotional processing deficits and informs appropriate interventions for individuals experiencing these challenges.

2.4 Etiology and Measurement:

The origins of alexithymia are complex and multifactorial. Genetic factors, early childhood experiences, and neurobiological mechanisms have been implicated in its development (Sifneos, 1973; Moriguchi et al., 2007; Poquérusse et al., 2018). Furthermore, alexithymia is frequently associated with several psychiatric and medical conditions, such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and somatic symptom disorders (Thorberg et al., 2009; Westwood et al., 2017). Understanding the etiology and comorbidity of alexithymia is crucial for its identification and effective intervention.

Alexithymia is a complex construct with far-reaching implications for emotional processing and psychological well-being. Understanding its diverse definitions, symptoms, and types provides a comprehensive perspective on its impact on individuals' lives. The etiology, comorbidity, and assessment of alexithymia further enhance our ability to identify and support individuals experiencing difficulties in emotional awareness and expression.

3. The Big Five Personality Traits:

The "Big Five" personality traits, also known as the Five-Factor Model (FFM), represent a widely studied and recognized framework in the field of psychology for understanding human personality. This model organizes personality traits into five broad dimensions that collectively encompass a comprehensive range of individual differences. The "Big Five" traits are Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. Each trait reflects distinct aspects of an individual's personality and plays a crucial role in shaping their behavior, emotions, and interpersonal interactions.

The history of the "Big Five" model can be traced back to the mid-20th century when several researchers, including Raymond Cattell and Hans Eysenck, identified core dimensions of personality through factor analysis. However, it was Paul Costa and Robert McCrae who, in the 1980s and 1990s, solidified the FFM as we know it today, based on extensive research using the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R) and its subsequent versions (Costa & McCrae, 2008).

Table 1: Overview of the Big Five Personality Traits

Personality Trait	Description
Openness	Curiosity, imagination, receptivity to new ideas
Conscientiousness	Organized, responsible, goal-oriented
Extraversion	Sociable, assertive, outgoing
Agreeableness	Compassionate, cooperative, empathetic
Neuroticism	Emotional instability, prone to negative emotions

3.1 Openness to Experience:

Openness to Experience reflects an individual's inclination toward curiosity, imagination, and receptivity to novel ideas and experiences. High scorers in this trait tend to be open-minded, creative, and appreciative of art and aesthetics. They enjoy exploring new concepts and embracing unconventional perspectives. In contrast, low scorers tend to be more traditional, practical, and conservative in their approach to life (McCrae & Costa, 1991). Facets of Openness include:

- **Fantasy:** A tendency to have a vivid imagination and engage in daydreaming.
- **Aesthetics:** An appreciation for art, beauty, and aesthetic experiences.
- **Feelings:** Being emotionally open and in touch with one's feelings.
- **Actions:** Willingness to take risks and try new activities.

High levels of Openness have been associated with greater cognitive flexibility, adaptability, and openness to change. Individuals high in Openness often pursue careers in the arts, sciences, or research-related fields (DeYoung, 2015).

3.2 Conscientiousness:

Conscientiousness reflects an individual's tendency to be organized, responsible, and goal-directed. High scorers in Conscientiousness are disciplined, reliable, and focused on achieving their objectives. They exhibit strong self-discipline and are diligent in fulfilling their obligations. In contrast, low scorers may struggle with time management, lack

discipline, and be more spontaneous (Roberts et al., 2014). Facets of Conscientiousness include:

- **Competence:** The ability to effectively complete tasks and meet challenges.
- **Order:** A preference for structure and organization in daily life.
- **Dutifulness:** A strong sense of responsibility and conscientiousness in fulfilling obligations.
- **Achievement-Striving:** A strong drive for achievement and setting high standards for oneself.

Conscientious individuals tend to excel in academic and professional settings, and they are often perceived as reliable and trustworthy in personal and work relationships (Roberts et al., 2014).

33. Extraversion:

Extraversion reflects an individual's level of sociability, assertiveness, and enthusiasm in social interactions. High scorers in Extraversion are outgoing, energized by social gatherings, and enjoy being in the company of others. They tend to be talkative, assertive, and seek excitement and stimulation. In contrast, low scorers may prefer solitude, be reserved, and feel drained by prolonged social interactions (Costa & McCrae, 1985). Facets of Extraversion include:

- **Warmth:** Friendliness, approachability, and affection toward others.
- **Gregariousness:** A preference for socializing and being in the company of others.
- **Assertiveness:** The ability to confidently express one's ideas and opinions.
- **Activity:** A preference for high levels of energy and involvement in various activities.

Extraverted individuals often excel in roles that require strong communication and leadership skills. They thrive in careers that involve public speaking, sales, or team-oriented environments (DeYoung, 2015).

3.4 Agreeableness:

Agreeableness reflects an individual's tendency to be kind, compassionate, and cooperative in their social interactions. High scorers in Agreeableness are empathetic, considerate of others' needs, and value harmonious relationships. They prioritize

cooperation over competition and are generally trusting and forgiving. In contrast, low scorers may be more assertive and focused on their own needs, sometimes at the expense of others' feelings (Costa & McCrae, 1985). Facets of Agreeableness include:

- **Trust:** A willingness to believe in the sincerity and good intentions of others.
- **Altruism:** A strong sense of empathy and willingness to help others in need.
- **Modesty:** Being humble and unassuming in one's interactions.
- **Tender-Mindedness:** A preference for nurturing and caring behaviors.

Agreeable individuals are often valued for their interpersonal skills, fostering positive and harmonious relationships in personal and professional settings (Costa & McCrae, 1991).

3.5 Neuroticism:

Neuroticism reflects an individual's level of emotional stability and proneness to experience negative emotions such as anxiety, sadness, and irritability. High scorers in Neuroticism are more emotionally reactive and may experience mood swings and heightened levels of stress. In contrast, low scorers tend to be emotionally stable, resilient, and better at coping with stressful situations (McCrae & Costa, 1991). Facets of Neuroticism include:

- **Anxiety:** The tendency to experience excessive worry and nervousness.
- **Depression:** A proneness to feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and worthlessness.
- **Anger:** A tendency to experience feelings of frustration and irritability.
- **Vulnerability:** A heightened sensitivity sensitive to stress and prone to feeling overwhelmed by challenging situations.
- **Self-Consciousness:** Concerned about others' opinions and self-evaluation.
- **Immoderation:** Intense emotional reactions to minor events.
- **Emotional Instability:** Susceptibility to mood swings and fluctuations.

4. The Correlation between Alexithymia and Each Big Five Trait:

4.1 Neuroticism and Alexithymia:

Neuroticism, characterized by emotional instability and vulnerability to negative emotions, has been consistently associated with higher levels of alexithymia. Individuals with pronounced neurotic traits tend to experience difficulties in identifying and expressing emotions, leading to higher alexithymic scores. They may also struggle with emotional regulation, leading to heightened anxiety and emotional distress (Honkalampi et al., 2000; Luminet et al., 2006).

Several studies have reported moderate to strong positive correlations between neuroticism and alexithymia scores. These findings suggest that individuals with greater emotional instability and negative affectivity are more likely to exhibit difficulties in emotional processing and recognizing their feelings. The link between neuroticism and alexithymia highlights the importance of emotional regulation in individuals' psychological well-being (Swart et al., 2013; Thorberg et al., 2011).

4.2 Extraversion and Alexithymia:

Extraversion, reflecting sociability, assertiveness, and positive affectivity, shows an inverse correlation with alexithymia. Individuals with lower extraversion scores tend to display higher levels of alexithymia, suggesting challenges in expressing emotions and engaging in social interactions. Introverted individuals may find it more challenging to convey their feelings to others and experience difficulty in recognizing emotional cues (Luminet et al., 2006; Swart et al., 2013).

While the correlation between extraversion and alexithymia is not as robust as that with neuroticism, the findings consistently support an inverse relationship. This association emphasizes the role of sociability and emotional expressiveness in understanding alexithymia and its impact on interpersonal functioning (Thorberg et al., 2011; Zdankiewicz-Ścigała et al., 2019).

4.3 Openness to Experience and Alexithymia:

Openness to Experience, reflecting curiosity, imagination, and receptiveness to novel ideas, has shown a weak but significant negative correlation with alexithymia. Individuals with lower scores in openness tend to demonstrate higher levels of alexithymia, suggesting potential difficulties in exploring and expressing emotions creatively. Conversely, those with higher openness scores may be more adept at recognizing and embracing their emotional experiences (Luminet et al., 2006; Swart et al., 2013).

The correlation between openness to experience and alexithymia may not be as strong as with neuroticism or extraversion, but it offers insights into the relationship between personality traits and emotional awareness. (Thorberg et al., 2011) Understanding the link between openness and alexithymia can contribute to a broader understanding of how individuals with diverse personality traits perceive and process emotions

4.4 Conscientiousness and Alexithymia:

Conscientiousness, reflecting self-discipline, organization, and goal-directed behavior, shows a relatively weak negative correlation with alexithymia. Individuals with lower conscientiousness scores tend to exhibit higher levels of alexithymia, indicating potential difficulties in managing and expressing emotions in a controlled and goal-oriented manner. In contrast, individuals with higher conscientiousness scores may be better at recognizing and managing their emotions effectively (Luminet et al., 2006; Swart et al., 2009).

While the correlation between conscientiousness and alexithymia is not as robust as with neuroticism or extraversion, it adds to our understanding of emotional processing in individuals with different levels of conscientiousness. The relationship between these traits may influence emotional regulation and overall psychological functioning (Thorberg et al., 2011; Zdankiewicz-Ścigała et al., 2019).

4.5 Agreeableness and Alexithymia:

Agreeableness, characterized by compassion, cooperation, and prosocial behavior, shows a weak but significant negative correlation with alexithymia. Individuals with lower agreeableness scores may exhibit higher levels of alexithymia, suggesting potential difficulties in recognizing and expressing emotions in social contexts. Those with higher agreeableness scores may demonstrate greater emotional sensitivity and empathy (Grabe et al., 2004; Swart et al., 2013).

The correlation between agreeableness and alexithymia offers insights into emotional expressiveness in interpersonal interactions. Understanding this relationship can contribute to a deeper understanding of emotional awareness and its impact on social relationships and communication (Thorberg et al., 2011; Zdankiewicz-Ścigała et al., 2019).

Table 2: The Association between Alexithymia and Each Big Five Trait

Personality Trait	Correlation with Alexithymia	Implication
Neuroticism	Positive correlation	Higher emotional reactivity
Extraversion	Negative correlation	Challenges in emotional expression
Openness	Weak negative correlation	Potential difficulties in emotional exploration
Conscientiousness	Weak negative correlation	Challenges in emotional regulation
Agreeableness	Weak negative correlation	Potential difficulties in social emotional interactions

The relationship between alexithymia and the Big Five Personality Traits reveals intriguing insights into the complexities of emotional processing and individual differences in personality. Neuroticism, characterized by heightened emotional reactivity, shows a positive correlation with alexithymia, indicating difficulties in recognizing and expressing emotions for emotionally sensitive individuals. In contrast, extraversion demonstrates a negative correlation, suggesting that introverted individuals may encounter challenges in emotional expression and social interactions. Openness to Experience exhibits a weak negative correlation, hinting at potential difficulties in emotional exploration and creative expression for individuals with lower openness scores. Similarly, conscientiousness and agreeableness display weak negative correlations, indicating potential difficulties in emotional regulation and social emotional interactions, respectively. Understanding these correlations offers valuable insights for supporting emotional well-being and fostering effective interpersonal communication.

5. Conclusion:

The exploration of the relationship between alexithymia and the Big Five Personality Traits has provided valuable insights into emotional processing and personality functioning. Alexithymia, characterized by difficulties in identifying and expressing emotions, has been found to be significantly correlated with certain personality traits. The review of existing literature revealed consistent associations between alexithymia and neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness.

Individuals with higher levels of neuroticism tend to exhibit higher alexithymic scores, reflecting emotional instability and difficulties in emotional regulation. On the other hand, lower scores in extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness have been associated with higher levels of alexithymia, indicating potential challenges in emotional expressiveness, creativity, and interpersonal communication.

Despite the consistent correlations found in the literature, some studies have reported variations in the strength of associations, emphasizing the importance of considering contextual factors and methodological differences in future research. Demographic variables, psychological factors, and situational contexts were identified as potential mediating and moderating factors that could influence the relationship between alexithymia and specific personality traits.

The implications of the findings from this review extend to the fields of clinical psychology, counseling, and psychotherapy. Understanding the connection between alexithymia and specific personality traits can enhance the assessment and treatment of individuals with emotional processing difficulties. Tailoring therapeutic interventions to address both alexithymia and specific personality traits may lead to improved emotional awareness, communication, and overall psychological well-being.

The study findings underscore the significance of studying the interplay between alexithymia and personality traits to gain a comprehensive understanding of emotional processing and personality functioning. Future research endeavors should continue to investigate the underlying mechanisms that link these constructs and explore their implications for mental health and well-being. By shedding light on the complex relationship between alexithymia and personality traits, this research contributes to the broader knowledge in the fields of psychology and opens avenues for further exploration and intervention to improve emotional awareness and psychological functioning in individuals with alexithymia.

In conclusion, the interplay between alexithymia and personality traits offers valuable insights into emotional processing and personality functioning. The findings contribute to our understanding of emotional awareness and its impact on mental health. Further research in this area will deepen our knowledge and pave the way for effective interventions to enhance emotional well-being in individuals with alexithymia and diverse personality traits.

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