

Alexithymia and Meta-Mood: How Valid is the Toronto Alexithymia Scale?

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Abstract

Alexithymia is a clinical condition in which people have difficulty describing their emotions (Nemiah & Snifeos, 1970). People with Alexithymia are unable to distinguish between similar emotions, rarely reflect upon their emotions, and tend to describe external circumstances when asked about their emotions (Lesser, 1981). The most commonly used measure of Alexithymia is the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20; Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994). It consists of 20 self-report items, which are divided into three subscales: Difficulty Identifying Feelings, Difficulty Describing Feelings, and Externally Oriented Thinking. Some researchers have criticized the validity of the TAS-20 (Kooiman, Spinhoven, & Trijsburg, 2001). The purpose of this study was to further examine the validity of the TAS-20 by correlating its three subscales with the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS; Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995). TMMS includes three scales. Attention measures the tendency to pay attention to one's emotions when they occur and to value them for making decisions. Clarity measures the ability to identify one's own emotions. Repair measures optimism and the ability to reduce negative emotional states. We hypothesized that the TAS-20 Externally Oriented Thinking Subscale would be negatively correlated with the TMMS Attention Scale, and that the TAS Difficulty Identifying Feelings and Difficulty Describing Feelings Subscales would be negatively correlated with TMMS Clarity Scale.

A total of 217 undergraduates (149 females, 68 males) completed this study in exchange for course credit. They completed both measures online as part of a larger study. All three of the predicted correlations were large. This provides evidence for the validity of the TAS-20. Additional research is still needed. Previous research has found that items on these scales form a single factor (Kooiman, Spinhoven, & Trijsburg, 2001), and in this study the correlations of the Difficulty Identifying Feelings and Difficulty Describing Feelings Subscales with the TMMS were similar. Future research should examine the differential validity of the Difficulty Identifying Feelings and Difficulty Describing Feelings Subscales.

Introduction

The word "Alexithymia" has a literal translation for "no words for mood" (Lesser, 1981). In addition to having difficulty finding accurate words to describe their feelings, people with Alexithymia pay close attention to the present and little attention to their imaginations (Lesser, 1981). Individuals with Alexithymia have difficulty describing feelings, difficulty classifying emotions, and social over-adaption, limited fantasy life, difficulty remembering dreams, and tend not to reflect upon their emotional experiences (Lesser, 1981). The most commonly used measure of Alexithymia is the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20; Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994). The TAS-20 has three subscales: Difficulty Identifying Feelings, Difficulty Describing Feelings, and Externally Oriented Thinking. Research on the validity of the TAS-20 has had mixed results. Kooiman et al. (2001) stated that the TAS-20 should not be used in clinical settings as a stand-alone test for Alexithymia because it lacks content validity. For example, note that the TAS-20 does not include measures of fantasy life or the ability to remember dreams. Bagby et al. (1994), however, stated that the TAS-20 can be used in clinical and non-clinical studies because its three factor structure is stable and is able to be replicated in both populations.

The purpose of this study was to further examine the validity of the TAS-20 by correlating its three subscales with the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS; Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995). We selected the TMMS because the meta-experience of mood may be related to Alexithymia. A person is having a meta-experience of their mood when they are aware of both their mood and their thoughts about that mood (Mayer & Stevens, 1994). Meta-experience is evidenced in statements such as "I shouldn't feel this way" and "I'm thinking good things to cheer up." Thus, Alexithymia and meta-mood represent opposite ends of a continuum in regards to the ability to recognize and evaluate one's emotions. Alexithymic individuals have trouble describing their emotions. In contrast, those with strong meta-mood are able to understand and regulate their emotions. We believe that high scores on the TAS-20 will be associated with low scores on the TMMS. In particular, we hypothesize that the TAS-20 Difficulty Identifying Feelings and Difficulty Describing Feelings scales will have negative correlations with the TMMS Clarity scale, and that the TAS-20 Externally Oriented Thinking scale will have a negative correlation with the TMMS Attention scale.

Method

Participants

A total of 217 undergraduate students (149 females, 68 males) participated in this study in return for course credit. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 49 (mean = 22.60, SD = 6.20) and identified themselves as follows: 58.5% Caucasian, 9.2% Hispanic, 15.2% Asian, 10.1% African American, 0.5% Native American, and 6.5% other.

Measures

Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20; Bagby et al., 1994)

The TAS-20 has 20 items, five of which are reverse scored (items 4, 5, 10, 18, and 19). It has three subscales. Difficulty Identifying Feelings measures an individual's ability to distinguish between feelings and other somatic sensations. Difficulty Describing Feelings measures how difficult it is for an individual to describe their emotions. Externally Oriented Thinking measures the tendency to focus upon external circumstances rather than internal emotions.

Trait Meta Mood Scale (TMMS; Salovey et al., 1995)

The TMMS has 30 item divided among three subscales: Attention, Clarity, and Repair. Attention is the tendency to pay attention to one's emotions. Clarity is the ability to distinguish the particular emotion that is being felt. Repair is the ability to prolong positive moods and change negative moods into positive ones.

Procedures

This study was completed online. There were two parts: each took about 1 hour 30 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

We correlated the three subscales of the TAS-20 with the three subscales of the TMMS.

Results

The correlations between Alexithymia and meta-mood were all negative and statistically significant (see Table 1). Most correlations were small. However, three correlations were large: the correlations the TAS-20 Difficulty Identifying Feelings and Difficulty Describing Feelings scales with TMMS Clarity, and the correlation between TAS-20 Externally Oriented Thinking and TMMS Attention.

Table 1

Correlations between TAS-20 Subscales and TMMS Scales

TAS-20 Subscales	TMMS		
	Repair	Attention	Clarity
Difficulty Identifying Feelings	-.39**	-.23**	-.76**
Difficulty Describing Feelings	-.32**	-.33**	-.62**
Externally Oriented Thinking	-.29**	-.54**	-.28**

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the convergent validity of the three subscales of the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20). As expected, the TAS-20 scales had strong correlations with the most similar subscales from the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS). In particular, Externally Oriented Thinking had a strong negative correlation with the tendency to pay attention to one's own emotions; and Difficulty Identifying Feelings and Difficulty Describing Feelings both had strong negative correlations with the tendency to be able to describe one's emotions clearly. Regardless of previous claims that some aspects of Alexithymia may not be adequately represented on the TAS-20 (Kooiman et al., 2001), this study provides evidence for the convergent validity of the three scales that are currently a part of the TAS-20. Future research should consider expanding the aspects of Alexithymia that are measured by the TAS-20.

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