

YCRA RESEARCH

BRIEF:

Psychosocial Correlates of ALEXITHYMIA IN A RURAL ADOLESCENT POPULATION:

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Key points in the Literature Review:

- Adolescents who have difficulty identifying, verbalizing, and cognitively processing feelings may be at increased risk for emotional dysregulation, mental health disorders, and risk behavior (Bongers, Koot, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2003; Suveg et al., 2008)
- Alexithymia is associated with reduced symbolic thinking, impoverished fantasy life, and an externally oriented cognitive style focused on facts, and data rather than psychological introspective (Bouchard et al., 2008; Lumley, Gustavson, Partridge, & Labouvie-Vief, 2005; Picardi, Toni, & Caroppo, 2005; Taylor & Bagby, 2004).
- Emotional experiences that are not modulated through cognitive processing are often expressed as maladaptive risk behaviors (Lumely et al., 2005; Scott, 2009; Taylor & Bagby, 2004).
- Although the etiology of alexithymia is not entirely clear, exposure to dysfunctional affective environments during critical periods of cognitive and emotional development of emotional awareness, expression, and behavior regulation (Buist et al., 2004; Cole & Deater-Deckard, 2009; Zegers, Schuengel, Van IJzendoorn, & Janssens, 2008).
- Larson's (2000) two-stage model of emotion regulation suggests that individuals may be unable to cope with

negative affect effectively if they incorrectly identify an emotional state.

- Erik Erikson proposed that a primary psychosocial task in adolescence is to develop a strong sense of self in the context of one's culture.
- Many studies have demonstrated that boys and girls perceive and evaluate their problems differently, and society tends to reinforce affect expression differently for boys and girls (Garside & Klimes-Dougan, 2002; Klimes-Dougan, & Zeman, 2007).
- The effects of gender socialization may be more detrimental for emotional development of girls than boys, specifically with regard to autonomy and identity formation (Ollech & McCarthy, 1997; Severino, McNutt, & Feder, 1987).
- The stage of adolescence brings a process of "gender intensification" for females, which involves increased self-consciousness, decreased self-esteem, conflictual dependence, and heightened receptivity to the opinions of others (Severino, et al., 1987).

Purpose of Study: The purpose of the study is twofold. The first objective was to investigate the validity of the alexithymia construct in a residential population of adolescents. Our second objective was to examine gender differences on measures of alexithymia, psychosocial development, and risk behavior.

Methods: Data for this present study were collected from 67 clinical adolescent residents residing six months or longer at a rural residential treatment center in the Rocky Mountain Region of the United States.

Participants: All participants were referred to this facility for one or more of the following reasons: (a) non-compliance in school, (b) history of criminal activity, or (c) having been a referral to Child Protective Services.

Instruments Used: The TAS-20 (Toronto Alexithymia Scale-20) was used to assess alexithymia. The EAQ (Emotional Awareness Questionnaire) was used to measure alexithymia in adolescents, and to address the predictive limitations of the TAS-20. The MPD

(Measure of Psychosocial Development) was used to assess levels of psychosocial development related to emotional functioning in adolescents. The YCRA (Youth Comprehensive Risk Assessment) was utilized to assess adolescent risk behavior.

Key Results:

- Results of the study provide preliminary, yet supportive evidence of the validity of the alexithymia construct in a clinical population of adolescents, and lend support for the TAS-20 and EAQ-30 for research and clinical purposes with adolescents.
- Our results imply that developing a sense of autonomy, viewing the self as competent, and maintaining close, interpersonal relationships is compromised by deficits in emotional awareness and expression, and that emotional awareness and expression are key factors to consider in the treatment of adolescents. None of the psychosocial variables in the current study were significantly associated with risk behavior, and the only alexithymia variable associated with risk behavior was the Bodily Awareness subscale of EAQ.
- Our results bring light the crucial influence of self-body relations in emotional development and affect regulation.
- In evaluating gender differences, we found that female adolescents endorsed significantly more symptoms of alexithymia than males on both measures, and demonstrated significantly more risk to self; while males presented more risk to others.
- Additionally, females demonstrated significantly more shame and less bodily awareness than males.

Key Conclusions/Recommendations: This study contributes to a broader understanding of emotional development and regulation in adolescents and highlights underlying mechanisms that differentiate how male and female adolescents experience and express emotion. Our study was exploratory in nature,

with a relatively low number of participants. There is some question whether our findings can be generalized to populations outside of a residential treatment setting. Also, we did not examine differences in age or race. The study was correlational in nature, and causal connection or mediation models were not used. However, there is evidence to suggest that shame and diminished bodily awareness might emerge as mediators of alexithymia and risk behavior. Future studies should include a larger sample of adolescents to explore the possible moderating effects of body shame on risk behavior or attempt to draw more definitive causal connections.