Alexithymia and Hemispheric Lateralization of Emotional Valence and Verbal Ability

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Individuals with alexithymia, a condition characterized by difficulty identifying and describing emotions, have been shown to process emotions in their brain hemispheres differently than do nonalexithymics. The purposes of this study were to explore the relationship between alexithymia scores and emotion valence ratings (the perceived positivity or negativity of an emotion) in the context of conflicting emotion lateralization theories, and the relationships between alexithymia and vocabulary, a measure defined as left hemisphere controlled. Participants in the study completed an alexithymia questionnaire, a self report measure on the participant's perception of the valence of emotions, and a vocabulary test. As hypothesized, alexithymics rated negative emotion words less negatively than did non-alexithymics. This indicates that alexithymics have a less extreme perception of emotions, at least in the negative emotion spectrum. As for the role of the separate brain hemispheres in alexithymia, one explanation for why highly alexithymic people rated negative emotion terms as slightly more positive is that they are processing negative emotions in the brain hemisphere which may be more suited for processing positively-valenced emotions: the left hemisphere. While normal individuals process emotions in either hemisphere, alexithymics preferentially process all emotions in the left hemisphere. In addition, vocabulary scores, an indicator of left hemispheric dysfunctioning, decreased as alexithymia scores increased, further suggesting that alexithymia is rooted in left hemispheric dysfunctioning. These verbal ability and emotion perception insights can enhance both psychiatric and medical treatment of alexithymic individuals.