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**ALEXITHYMIA IN RELATION TO SPIRITUALITY****Titus Lassar , Sreekumar Radhakrishna Pillai & Raju,S.**

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**Abstract:** The objective of the study was to explore the nature and extent of association between alexithymia and spirituality and also to explore how alexithymia varies across demographic variables. Even though research on the relationship between alexithymia and spirituality may have implications in mental health services, the studies in this area are very little. So the hypotheses formulated for the study were: there will be no significant relationship between alexithymia and spirituality; and, there will be no significant differences in alexithymia across gender, age classifications and locale. The tools used for procuring data were: Alexithymia Scale and Spirituality Index. Data were analysed using Carl Pearson Product Moment correlation, t-test .One way ANOVA and Duncan Procedure. The results show that there is a significant negative correlation between alexithymia and spirituality. Again, alexithymia is found to vary significantly across the age categories and locale, but no such difference was found for gender. The results of the present study have implications in the treatment of alexithymia and may guide future research in this area.

**Keyword:** Alexithymia , Spirituality , Demographic Variables , Mental Health Services.

**INTRODUCTION**

Alexithymia was first described by Sifneos(1973) as a multifaceted construct characterised by difficulty identifying and communicating feelings, differentiating feelings and somatic sensation of emotional arousal, lack of fantasy and imagination and an externally oriented cognitive style (Nemiah, Freyberger, & Sifneos, 1976). Alexithymia has been considered as a vulnerability factor for psychiatric illnesses (Taylor, & Bagby, 2004), correlated with impaired social functioning and distortions of relationships (Nicolo et. Al., 2010), and predisposes individuals to drug abuse disorders (Morrison & Pihl, 1990). The prevalence of alexithymia has been reported to be 9% to 17% for men and 5 to 10 % for women (Mattila, Ahola, Huhtala & Joukamaa, 2007). Alexithymia is conceptualized by Taylor (1994) as a personality trait that is normally distributed throughout the population.

Religion and spirituality seems to have pervasive influence in the lives of people all over the world. According to Elkins (2001) and Piedmont and Leach (2000), spirituality is a covert emotional state of being as well as beliefs and values that pervade one's perceptions of life. Biddle (1956) said religion is an integral factor in emotional life. So the present study on the association between spirituality and alexithymia may have significant implications on mental health services.

There seems to be very little studies on the association of alexithymia and spirituality. A study conducted in the US entitled "Spiritual well-being, dissociation, and alexithymia: examining direct and moderating, effects" Rosik and Soria (2012) surveyed 131 adults in an intensive outpatient psychotherapy program to determine whether dissociation and alexithymia are associated with spiritual well-being. They used the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), and the Spiritual Well-Being

Scale (SWB) and the Dissociative Experiences Scale-II (DES-II). And found no association between alexithymia and SWB. Though alexithymia is a cross cultural phenomenon (Parker, Shaughnessy, Wood, Majeski & Eastabrook, 2005), it seems to be important to study this variable on a different culture and ethnic population. The studies on alexithymia in Indian population are limited and the research on the association between alexithymia and spirituality are very little. So the study is a unique attempt to explore the nature and extent of association between alexithymia and spirituality.

The association between alexithymia and sociodemographic variables are also under investigated. Conflicting results have been reported in studies examining the relationships between alexithymia and the variables of age, gender, social class, and intelligence.

In a study on the Sociodemographic correlates of alexithymia, Lane, Sechrest and Riedel (1998) administered Toronto Alexithymia Scale -20 item version (TAS-20) on 380 subjects from the community stratified equally across sex, five age groups, and three socioeconomic classes. They found that Alexithymia is associated with older age, male sex, lower SES, and fewer years of education.

However, Parker, Taylor and Bagby (1989) in their study entitled- 'The alexithymia construct: relationship with sociodemographic variables and intelligence', found that alexithymia, as measured by the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS), was not associated with age, gender, educational level, and socioeconomic status.

Salminen, Saarijarvi, Aarela, Toikka, and Kauhanen (1999) studied 'Prevalence of alexithymia and its association with sociodemographic variables in the general population of Finland' on a sample of 1285 people representing the general population using 20 item Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS 20) found that the prevalence of

alexithymia was 13%. Men were alexithymic almost twice (17%) as often as women (10%). Multivariate analysis showed that alexithymia was associated with male gender, advanced age, low educational level, and low socioeconomic status.

#### OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study was to examine the association between alexithymia and spirituality of adult population and also examine how alexithymia varies across gender, age-categories, and locale.

#### HYPOTHESES

1. Alexithymia will not have any significant correlation with spirituality.
2. Alexithymia will not vary significantly across gender, age categories, and locale.

#### Method

The method of the study is briefly described below:

#### Sample

The sample of the study consisted of 150 people from Kerala, India. Both males (n= 70) and females (n= 80) and people belonging the three major religions, viz., Hinduism (n= 50), Islam(n=50, and Christianity (n= 50) were included in the study. Also, the sample represents people from all socio economic status.

#### Tools:

##### 1. Alexithymia scale (Titus and Raju, 2010).

This self-reporting scale was developed and standardized by Titus Lassar and S. Raju (2010). Alexithymia Scale was designed to measure the Alexithymia of people belonging to general population. It is 44 item scales with equal number of positive and negative items and measured on a Likert five point scale with the responses ranging from Strongly disagree to Strongly agree. The test has been proved to have sufficient reliability and validity.

##### 2. Spirituality Scale (Sreekumar and Sanadaraj, 2005)

Spirituality refers to the personal, subjective side of religious experience. Spirituality includes a broad focus on the immaterial features of life that are used to understand material life. The present Spirituality Scale (Sreekumar & Sananda Raj, 2002) was designed to measure the spirituality of people belonging to Hindu, Christian, and Islam religions. The scale contains 26 items, including both positive and negative items, and the measurement is on a Likert five-point scale.

##### 3. Personal data schedule

A personal data schedule was used to collect information regarding age, sex, locale, and other relevant information.

#### STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Statistical technique such as Carl Pearson Product moment Correlation, t-test and One Way ANOVA and Duncan test was used to analyse the data. Analysis were done

using SPSS version 16 package.

#### RESULTS

The association between alexithymia and spirituality was found using Carl Pearson product moment Correlation technique. The results obtained in the analysis show that there was a statistically significant negative correlation between alexithymia and spirituality for both men and women. The Carl Pearson Product moment correlation coefficient for men and women were -0.47 and -0.53 respectively. Both values are significant at 0.01 level. In order to analyse the gender wise difference in alexithymia, t-test was used and the results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**t –test results comparing males and females on alexithymia**

Sl. No	Variable	Males		Females		t-value
		M <sub>1</sub>	SD <sub>1</sub>	M <sub>2</sub>	SD <sub>2</sub>	
1	Alexithymia	103.87	53.96	96.14	49.70	1.81 NS

The above results indicate that men (m= 103.87) and women (m= 96.14) did not vary significantly in alexithymia (t= 1.81, p>0.05).

One way analysis of variance was conducted to know whether there is any significant difference in alexithymia across the three age categories, viz., 25-35, 35-45- and 45-55.  $F_{(2)} = 22.74$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . In order to test where the difference existed, post hoc comparison was done using Duncan tests. The details of Duncan results are given in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Post hoc comparison (Duncan) results for alexithymia across age-categories**

Sl.No	Age categories	N	Mean	1	2	3
1	20-35	68	101.48	( )	*	*
2	35-45	45	112.14	..	( )	*
3	45-55	37	83.76	..	..	( )

\* indicates significant difference between the groups.

The above results show that all the three age categories vary significantly across each other in terms of their alexithymia scores. The 35-45 age group had the highest mean score on alexithymia followed by 25-35 and 45-55.

One way ANOVA comparing alexithymia across locale (rural, semi-urban and urban) indicate a statistically

significant difference  $F(2) = 56.45, p < 0.01$ . The details of the the post hoc comparison using Duncan procedure are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
**Post hoc comparison (Duncan) results for alexithymia across locale**

Sl.No	Locale	N	Mean	1	2	3
1	Rural	76	126.00	( )	*	*
2	Semi-Urban	42	87.30	..	( )	
3	Urban	32	78.79	..	..	( )

\* indicates significant difference between the groups.

It is evident from the results given in the table that the rural group vary significantly from semi urban and urban group in levels of their alexithymia score but no such difference was found between semi –urban and urban group. The mean alexithymia score of the rural, semi-urban and urban groups were 126, 87.3 and 78.39 respectively.

#### DISCUSSION

The present study attempted to explore how alexithymia is related to spirituality. A statistically significant correlation was found in this study and it indicates that as spirituality of the sample increases their alexithymia decreases or vice versa. There are only a very few studies in this area. A study conducted by Rosik and Soria (2012) on the US population showed no significant association between these two variables. The population for the present study is different and the ethno cultural differences and other characteristics of the population may be influential in determining the association of spirituality and alexithymia. More studies in this area are required to explore the relationship further.

Findings on demographics and alexithymia, this study show no gender wise difference in alexithymia. It means that men and women have more or less the same level of alexithymia or being a men or a women does not have any influence on the level of alexithymia of the person. The study is in line with the findings of Taylor and Bagby(1989), but some other studies show that alexithymia is associated with male gender(Lane, Sechrest& Riedel , 1998; Salminen, Saarijarvi, Aarela, Toikka, & Kauhanen 1999).

The marked difference in observed in alexithymia across different age-categories seems to be interesting. People at the age range 35-45 have the highest scores on alexithymia followed by 25-35 and 45-55 groups. Alexithymia is considerably low among those who are younger age categories and higher age categories. It shows that lower emotional awareness is evident in middle age categories compared with younger categories and higher

age categories.

Regarding locale, people from the rural area reported to have higher level of alexithymic scores compared with more urban people. The characteristics of rural and urban living may have different influences on the way people understand and communicate their emotions. The semi-urban and urban groups manifested more or less the same scores in alexithymia.

Studies conducted by Lane, Sechrestand Riedel (1998) and Salminen, Saarijarvi, Aarela, Toikka, and Kauhanen(1999) also suggest that age and socioeconomic status is associated with alexithymia, while Taylor and Bagby(1989) reports no such relationships. Studies with more sample size and rigorous methods are required to reveal this further.

#### CONCLUSION

The present study finds a negative association between alexithymia and spirituality. Moreover, alexithymia is found to be high among the younger ones and also among the people from rural area. This study may give direction to future research to developing psychological interventions for alexithymia. It may also help Psychologists, Counsellors and other mental health professionals to understand alexithymia on a demographic context to a limited extent. The study warrants more studies in this promising but under investigated area.

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