
On the relationship between alexithymia and social cognition in borderline personality disorder

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Abstract

Patients with borderline personality disorder (BPD) are characterized by emotional dysregulation, especially in social settings. It has been shown that BPD patients show particular high degree of alexithymia among psychiatric disorders. Previous studies have shown reduced capability in cognitive empathy and higher levels of personal distress in healthy alexithymic individuals. Research on social cognition in BPD have revealed divergent findings with improved emotion recognition in BPD patients or impaired emotion recognition. The present study aimed at investigating the relationship between alexithymia and social cognition in 23 BPD patients and 34 healthy subjects. Alexithymia was assessed with the TAS-20. Social cognition was examined with an empathy self-report (Interpersonal Reactivity Index, IRI) and an objective approach. For the latter we performed the Reading the Mind in the Eyes task (RMET), which tests theory of mind. The results showed that BPD patients scored significantly higher in the IRI subscale 'Personal distress' than healthy subjects. Moreover, BPD patients were significantly better and faster in the RMET. Correlation analyses revealed an inverse relationship between the performance on the RMET and TAS-20 in the BPD group. In addition, a negative correlation was found between alexithymia and the IRI subscales 'empathic concern' (affective empathy) and 'perspective taking' (cognitive empathy) and a positive correlation between alexithymia and 'personal distress'. The findings highlight the importance of considering alexithymia in BPD when testing social cognition.

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