
Relations between Alexithymia and Mentalizing

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Abstract

Disturbances in the ability to attribute mental states to self and others in order to understand and predict behavior (ToM = theory of mind) is discussed as an underlying mechanism in the development of severe psychiatric illnesses, e. g. autism spectrum disorders and schizophrenia. To date, there is little empirical evidence for answering the question if patients who suffer from psychosomatic and psychic conditions that require psychotherapeutic treatment have also an impairment in building up a theory of mind and if this impairment is connected to their decreased ability to be aware of their emotions consciously. The emotional awareness construct (Lane & Schwartz, 1989) refers to alexithymia, as defined by Sifnéos, but extends this definition by relating alexithymia to a general model of cognitive-emotional development and highlighting that in alexithymia the conscious awareness of affect arousal as emotions that can be verbalized, is impaired. Empirical data will be presented that demonstrate that inpatients with somatoform disorders, as compared to healthy controls, have deficits in emotional awareness and ToM-capacity and that these deficits are interrelated (Subic-Wrana C, Beutel ME, Knebel A, Lane RD. Theory of Mind and Emotional Awareness Deficits in Patients with Somatoform Disorders. *Psychosom Med*, 72 (4): 404-411, 2010). Additionally, new and unpublished mentalizing data on 200 patients before and at the end of inpatient treatment will be presented. After reviewing other empirical evidence for an interrelation between alexithymia and deficits in ToM-functioning, this interrelation will be discussed from a developmental perspective.

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