

Relationship between parenting, alexithymia and adult attachment styles: a cross-national study in Sicilian and Andalusian young adults

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Abstract

Literature underline that attachment styles can be considered as an important factor that facilitates exploration of the self and environment, and influences individual's thoughts, feelings and behavior, above all during adolescence. The purposes of the present study were the following: to investigate the relationship between parenting, alexithymia and adult attachment styles; to measure the predictive variables of the adult attachment-related anxiety and avoidance and the predictors of the level of alexithymia.

The participants were 217 students, of which: a group of 97 Andalusian academic students (44.7%), aged between 18 and 29 ($M = 19.47$; $SD = 2.23$); a group of 120 students from Sicilian academic students (55.3%), aged between 18 and 23 ($M = 18.85$; $SD = 1.11$). The participants were assigned to complete the following questionnaires: the Parental Bonding Instrument, the Toronto Alexithymia Scale, and the Experience in Close Relationships. Findings suggest that there are differences between Italy and Spain in adult attachment styles: in particular, Italian students appeared to manifest a higher tendency to use the avoidance style than Spanish ones, which manifested a higher level of anxiety. Furthermore, belonging to the Andalusian culture, and above all, having an elevated perception of the paternal and maternal overprotection could represent possible predictive variables to the general level of alexithymia. The results of this study support the research hypothesis that alexithymia is associated with the perceived parental bonding and attachment style.

Key words: Parenting, Alexithymia, Adult attachment, Spain, Italy

Introduction

Parenting processes include biological, social and relational aspects, related to the ability to be parents. It culminates with the development of the ability to organize the physical and emotional environment and to structure the dynamics facilitating the understanding of the surrounding world (Bornstein, 2002). The ability to be parents can be interpreted from a systemic perspective, which is, as a moment of individual growth, or a development task that parents must be able to cope with, in order to satisfactorily adapt themselves to changes resulting from the birth of a child (Ramaci et al., 2017; Scabini & Cigoli, 2000).

The ability to care for a child seems to be biologically rooted in humans, regardless of the ecological context in which the individual is inserted, thanks to the process of intuitive parenting (LeVine, 1974; Papousek & Papousek, 2002; Pellerone et al., 2017b).

The ecological context, however, helps us to understand the ways in which parent-child relationships are structured. The quality of parental care can

be influenced by three fundamental factors: the first of these factors relate to a child's characteristics, such as temperament; the second factor concerns the parents' characteristics; the third one seems to be the cultural context (Belsky, & Nezworski, 1988; Super & Harkness, 1986).

For this purpose, Parker's model based on care and overprotection dimensions appears to be particularly important, because it seems to have revolutionized the concept of maternal overprotection from the Levy's original model (1931). The author, who focuses his attention on the high levels of a mother's control, indicates this controlling attitude as a stable feature of overprotection. Parental figures are thus placed within two constructs: overprotection and care. The revolutionary connotation of his model is the intuition that excessive levels of care do not coincide with overprotection, but the concept of care appears to substantially overlap with the concept of parental warmth. This new theoretical model, therefore, defines optimal parenting as constituted by high levels of care and low levels of overprotection, in which: care refers to parents' capacity to be aware of and responsive to their children's needs and goals; control refers to parental practices which guide or direct children's behavior toward acceptable and age-appropriate standards, without relying on strict or harsh punishment (Parker, 1983; Parker, Tupling & Brown, 1979).

From theoretical models and theoretical contributions in literature, over the years, there has been a strong clinical interest about the way parental function is expressed through behaviors or styles. Although parental modalities can be influenced by several factors (such as the historical and cultural period), Baumrind's model (1966) seems to be particularly effective and durable over time; according to the author, an effective parenting promotes crucial qualities for the survival and adaptation of an individual. Baumrind proposes the presence of four educational styles: the authoritarian style, characterized by respect and strictly adherence to the rules; the permissive style, which promotes initiatives and decision-making skills in the child; the authoritative style, which imposes clear rules and, at the same time, respect for the child's wishes; finally, the negligent style,

characterized by reduced care and control (Sears, Maccoby & Levin, 1957).

The importance of a functional parenting style is largely demonstrated in literature and it appears to have consequences also on the development of the subject's personality. For example, literature underlines that a parenting style based on negligent conducts appears to be a risk factor for the development of various psychopathological conditions, including alexithymia.

The term “alexithymia” was first used by Sifneos (Peasley-Miklus, Panayiotou & Vrana, 2016) who had valued numerous patients with psychosomatic symptoms, such as difficulty in expressing verbal emotions and reduced phantasmatic activity (Caretto & Barbera, 2005). Sifneos described alexithymic patients as individuals who are often anxious and depressed, if carefully questioned about their emotional state, are unable to describe it, unless using generic and inconsistent terms.

Similarly, Lumley, Mader, Gramzow, and Papineau (1996) report a positive relationship between alexithymia and dysfunction in the models of family affective engagement. This study shows that the perception of acceptance and support by parents is a factor of protection from the development of alexithymia. Several studies have also focused on parents' alexithymia, pointing out that this may be a risk factor due to the inadequate functioning of the entire family context; in fact, subjects with alexithymia have difficulty in detecting and understanding emotions: if a parent is alexithymic, this can be a risk factor for dysfunctional family functioning, since the same parent has a lot of difficulties in providing an adequate emotional support to his/her own children, failing to get in touch with their own emotional sphere.

Recently, the construct of alexithymia has been increasingly validated and recognized, probably because the ability to recognize emotions and individual affectivity are considered to be fundamental to the individual's psychological integrity. Human emotionality, in fact, is not only a sign of a good mental equilibrium but also contributes to an adaptive response, normalizing internal states.

Actually, the literature describes alexithymia not only as a psychiatric symptom, but also a trait of personality, which can manifest in subjects, without psychiatric or medical conditions (Taylor, 1997, 2000, 2004), in correlation to the dysfunctional parenting styles.

In fact, research on childhood attachment styles shows that the primary sensitivity and responsiveness of a caregiver to the child's emotions are the main determinants for the development of strategies of emotional regulation, and ability to adequately correlate with others (Bowlby, 1969; Roque & Verisso, 2011). Indeed, the ability of emotional regulation is a process that involves neurophysiological and motor-expressive processes (Eizaguirre, 2002). So, alexithymia can be described as the difficulty of identifying, describing and communicating emotions, as well as differentiating emotional experiences and triggering proper physiological activation of emotions. Alexithymic subjects exhibit a marked difficulty in recognizing emotions and distinguishing them from bodily sensations that accompany emotional activation. They are characterized by the inability to describe their own feelings and emotions to others; furthermore, they exhibit a lack of creative and phantasmatic activity, as well as a thinking style predominantly oriented towards external stimuli, while ignoring the processing of information coming from their body. The inadequate emotional experience and the inability to manifest their state of stress have effects on the body, causing various physical dysfunctions (Frawley & Smith, 2001).

A fundamental part of our lives is influenced by emotions and memories related to them. Because of the inability to exaggerate the emotional nature of alexithymic subjects, even their facial expressions are rigid and reduced. The absence of empathy represents another limit of alexithymic subjects, determining the inability to build meaningful interpersonal relationships and intimate relationships (Pellerone et al., 2017c).

The ability to establish romantic interpersonal relationships and the ways in which these relationships are experienced have been widely studied in

the literature to understand the possible relation between nature of adult relationships and the style of individual attachment.

Bowlby has theorized that, during infancy, individuals internalize models of repeated interactions with their caregiver, through the establishment of internal working models, which serve as a cognitive map for the management of interpersonal relationships during adolescence and adulthood (Bowlby 1972, 1975, 1983; Sperling & Berman, 1994). The object representations contained in the Internal Operating Models (MOIs) constitute the imprinting of the interactive-relational schema, which contains information about the Self and Others. However, several studies (Mikulincer et al., 2006) have shown that the interaction between the two partners' MOIs is not sufficient to explain adult attachment modalities, but must be considered as an intervening variable, because the two partners' MOIs would not be fully explained only on the basis of the history of their infant relationships (Velotti & Zavattini, 2011). In fact, despite the MOIs becoming relatively stable over the course of life and addressing interpersonal behavior through specific socio-relational patterns (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008), the present relationships may have a significant influence in redefining the future adult attachment styles.

Literature underlines that adult attachment styles could be classified in the same way that Ainsworth (1989) had categorized the children attachment, with the addition of two dimensions, anxiety – which determines fear of rejection and abandonment within intimate relationships - and avoidance - which determines discomfort with intimacy and tendency to seek independence.

From the interaction of the two dimensions, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) show that the attachment styles can be classified into following types:

The Preoccupied Style is characterized by low self-esteem and high dependence. Subjects who adhere to this style have low self-esteem and high dependence on the judgment of others. In these individuals, the attachment behavior is activated, probably in order to avoid real or imaginary abandonment. They also tend to cling to relationships with the partner and require high levels of attention. Often they

remember a childhood made up of lying family boundaries and a weak mother, unable to better hold the child's anxieties.

The Dismissive Style is characterized by a positive self-representation and a negative representation of the others. Subjects with this style have a strong tendency to devalue the couple's experience by disabling attachment behavior. The Fearful Style is characterized by negative representations of both itself and the others. Individuals with this style of attachment show low confidence in others and avoid engaging in emotional relationships, possessing a strong propensity to self-culpability.

Finally, the Secure Style is characterized by positive representations of both itself and the others. Subjects in this group show high levels of trust in the partner, good autonomy and high levels of independence. The narration of their lives is consistent and detailed, accurate in evaluating the affective ties that have lived in the past. Their sentimental relationships tend to be stable over time, thanks to their ability to live positively within the couple; moreover, they are not afraid of the possibility of abandoning the partner.

Objective and aims

The purposes of the present study are the following: to investigate the relation between parenting (according to Baumrind's Model, 1966), alexithymia (according to the Model of Taylor and Bagby, 1999), and adult attachment styles (according to the Model of Hazan and Shaver, 1987); to measure the predictive variables of attachment-related anxiety and avoidance and the predictors of the level of alexithymia, identifying possible similarities and differences between two samples of the Mediterranean area, Sicily (Italy) and Andalusia (Spain). Both Italy and Spain have two clearly differentiated major regions: a northern region, where nuclear, conjugal, or restricted family structures are more frequent; and a southern region, where extended, parental, or enlarged families are predominant (Borsa & Nunes, 201; Miller, 1987; Pellerone et al., 2017a) Considering the configuration of the typically patriarchal Sicilian family, it

is assumed that the Sicilian students manifest a greater perception of parental control and care than Andalusian students (Pellerone, 2016a).

Furthermore, because of the configuration of the socio-relational Sicilian context - characterized by a strong need to meet parental and social expectations, to make a good impression when interacting with other people (showing integrity and bringing people to have respect for them) - it is assumed that Sicilian students manifest a higher level of anxiety and avoidant than Andalusian ones within adult relationships (Pellerone et al., 2016b).

Furthermore, it is hypothesized that: due to the specificity of the Italian culture in structuring mutual relations - in which emotional closeness and loyalty are demanded – the level of alexithymia could be predicted by the type of country, and by the level of parental care and overprotection (Aust et al., 2013; Hussian & Hamed, 2014; Wearden, 2005).

Finally, it is hypothesized that: age, gender, alexithymia and parental care are the predictive variables to attachment-related anxiety; similarly, age, alexithymia and parental control are the predictive variables to attachment-related avoidance.

Materials and methods

Participants

The present cross-national study was conducted on a group of 217 subjects of which:

- a group of 97 Andalusian academic students (44.7%), aged between 18 and 29 ($M = 19.47$; $SD = 2.23$), of which 25 boys (25.8%) and 72 girls (74.2%);
- a group of 120 students from Sicilian academic students (55.3%), aged between 18 and 23 ($M = 18.85$; $SD = 1.11$), of which 67 boys (55.8%) and 53 girls (44.2%).

Before administering the questionnaire to the students, we informed them that participation was anonymous and voluntary and explained the objective of the study. The average time taken to complete the questionnaire was 30 minutes. Convenience sampling was performed owing to accessibility.

Participants completed all self-report measures consecutively. They also provided information on their age, gender, and ethnicity prior to completing questionnaires.

Researchers collected data during a fellowship research program, conducted between 2015 and 2016. In particular, data were collected in two separate periods of time (data from Italy were collected first, then the Spanish data). The research procedures described in this article were performed in compliance with: the American Psychological Association, the Italian Psychological Association ethical guidelines for research and the ethical guidelines of the Spanish Psychological Society, and in compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki, the statement of ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects.

The research was approved by the IRB, Internal Review Board, of Faculty of Human and Social Sciences at the “Kore” University of Enna.

Instruments

For the measurement of the variables, participants completed the following instruments: Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI; Parker, Tupling & Brown, 1979), Twenty-Item Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS – 20; Parker, Bagby & Taylor, 1993), and Experience in Close Relationship (ECR; Picardi et al., 2002). The Parental Bonding Instrument is a questionnaire consisting of 25 items, divided into two parts (one for mother and one for father), which retrospectively measure the perception of the behavior of the parents during childhood. The instrument investigates the processes of parenting across two domains, parental care and control or overprotection, from the combination of which four types of attachment were classified: (a)

affectionate-constraint: high level of care and overprotection; (b) optimal parenting: high care and low protection; (c) affectionless-control: high protection and low care; (d) neglectful parenting: low care and low protection.

The Toronto Alexithymia Scale (Italian validation by Bressi et al. 1996) is a 20- item self-report which assess alexithymia through three-factor structure: a. Difficulty Identifying Feelings (DIF); b. Difficulty Communicating Feelings (DDF); c. Externally Oriented Thinking (EOT). The assessment is made a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The cut-off scores to categorize individuals are: alexithymia (score > 61), borderline ($52 \leq \text{scores} \leq 60$), and non-alexithymia (score ≤ 51). The TAS-20 shows adequate validity and reliability ($\alpha = .81$; $r = .77$). The Italian version also demonstrates good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha of .75 and 0.82 in normal and clinical groups, respectively).

The 36-Item Experiences in Close Relationships is used to evaluate the construct of adult attachment. Participants rate each of the 36 statements about connection using a 7-point Likert scale which ranges from 1-strongly disagree to 7-strongly agree. It groups people into four different categories on the basis of scores along two scales.

The ECR is designed to assess individual differences with respect to attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance. From the intersection of anxiety and avoidance scores, they have identified four types of attachment: secure (low avoidance and anxiety), worried (low avoidance and high anxiety), detached (high avoidance, low anxiety) and fearful (high avoidance and anxiety). The difference between secure and not secure attachment was based on the cut-off 3.46 for anxiety and 2.93 for avoidance.

Data analysis In reference to preliminary data, the multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was carried out to verify the influence of sex, age on parenting, alexithymia and relationships style.

In order to verify the first hypothesis, T-Test for independent groups was conducted in order to compare the scores obtained with the administration of the instruments to Italian and Spanish subjects. In order to verify the second hypothesis, T-Test for independent groups was conducted.

To assess the third hypotheses, multiple regression analyses were used, including the type of country and the level of parenting into the model.

To value the last research hypothesis, that is to explore the predictive variables of adult attachment style, analyses of hierarchical regression for separate blocks were used, including: sex and age in the first block; alexithymia subscales in the second block; parenting styles in the third block (last research hypothesis).

The level of significance was 0.05. All analyses were conducted with SPSS software (v 23.0). Among Spanish group, regarding to parenting, a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (Manova) showed the influence of age on level of maternal care ($F=2.28$, $p=0.02$), and the effect of interaction age*gender on the paternal overprotection ($F=2.59$, $p=0.04$); the analysis of mean scores underlined that younger students (18 years old) showed a higher perception of mother's care, in comparison to the male younger, which manifested a lower perception of father's control.

In a different way, among Italian group, the Multivariate Analysis of Variance (Manova) showed the only influence of gender on the paternal overprotection or control ($F=7.90$, $p=0.01$); the Tukey's post hoc underlined that younger students (18 years old) showed a lower perception of father's control.

Among Italian group, regarding to the level of alexithymia, a Multivariate Analysis of Variance showed the influence of age on difficulty identifying feeling ($F=2.72$, $p=0.02$), and the effect of interaction age*gender on difficulty identifying feeling ($F=2.89$, $p=0.04$); the analysis of mean scores underlined that older students (23 years old) showed a lower difficulty identifying feeling, in comparison to the male younger (20 years old), which manifested a higher difficulty to identify emotion and feeling.

With regards to Spanish group, the same analysis of variance showed

<i>Measures</i>	<i>Age</i>		<i>Gender</i>		<i>Age*Gender</i>	
	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>
Avoidance	0.82	0.54	0.15	0.70	0.47	0.71
Anxiety	5.46	<0.001	2.04	0.16	0.73	0.54

that age and gender variables did not seem to influence the level of alexithymia ($p>0.05$).

Finally, in reference to the adult attachment style, Manova underlines the effect of age variable on the level of anxiety (Table 1): the analysis of mean scores underlined that younger students (18 years old) showed a lower level of anxiety during adult relationship among Italian students.

Regarding to Spanish group, the same analysis of variance showed that age and gender did not seem to influence the level of avoidance and anxiety in adult romantic styles ($p>0.05$).

Results

In reference to the parenting, T-Test showed that there were significant differences (Table 2): in particular Italian students appeared to manifest higher mean scores than Spanish ones in paternal care and maternal overprotection.

Table 2 - T Test for independent group in reference to parenting (Italy versus Spain)

<i>Measures</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>Levene's Test Student's Test</i>				
	<i>M ± SD</i>	<i>M ± SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>P-value</i>
Maternal care	24.77± 6.98	24.63 ± 5.42	3.49	0.06	-0.16	214.66	0.84
Paternal care	25.12 ± 7.02	22.13 ± 5.86	2.31	0.13	-3.31	209.8	0.001
Maternal overprotection	18.84 ± 6.50	15.25 ± 7.09	3.65	0.06	-3.89	197.23	<0.001
Paternal overprotection	14.15 ± 6.09	13.11 ± 5.93	0.08	0.77	-1.25	200.38	0.211

manifested higher mean scores [$F=.21$ (gdl=215); $t= .65$; $p<0.01$] in difficulty describing feeling than Spanish ones (Italian: $M=15.07$, $S.D=4.33$; Spanish: $M=13.43$, $S.D=4.57$).

Regarding adult attachment styles, another T-Test for independent group showed the presence of significant differences (Table 3): in particular Italian students appeared to manifest higher mean scores in avoidance style than Spanish ones, who manifested a higher level of anxiety.

Table 3 - T Test for independent group in reference to adult attachment style (Italy versus Spain)

Measures	Italy	Spain	Levene's Test		Test		Student's
	M ± SD	M ± SD	F	P-value	t	df	P-value
Avoidance	50.98± 14.98	55.88 ± 20.25	9.48	0.002	2.04	168.15	0.04
Anxiety	64.75 ± 18.88	58.05 ± 18.09	2.31	0.13	-2.63	205.38	<0.001

In order to explore the predictive variables of the alexithymia, analyses of linear multiple regression were used, including in the model the type of country (Italian versus Andalusian students) and the level of parental care and overprotection. The first regression underlined that only maternal overprotection ($\beta=-0.23$, $p<0.01$) might be predictive of the Difficulty Identifying Feelings, explaining 12% of the overall variance.

The second regression demonstrated that the type of country ($\beta=-0.14$, $p<0.05$) and the maternal overprotection ($\beta=0.17$, $p<0.05$) represented predictive variables to the Difficulty Describing Feelings, explaining 13.4% of the general level of variance.

The third regression showed that maternal care and paternal overprotection could be considered as a predictor of the External

Oriented Thinking, although they explained only 6.6% of the overall variance (Table 4).

Table 4 - Model summary of hierarchical regression analyses that predicts the external oriented thinking

Measures	R ²	Adjusted R ²	SE	B	T	P-value
Country	0.25	0.07	0.59	0.06	0.80	0.43
Maternal care			0.05	-0.16	-2.04	0.04
Paternal care			0.05	0.11	1.49	0.14
Maternal overprotection			0.05	0.00	0.03	0.98
Paternal overprotection			0.05	0.16	2.26	0.03

Abbreviation: SE= Standard Error; β = Beta Standardized Coefficients

The same analysis underlined that the type of country, paternal overprotection, and above all maternal overprotection represented possible predictive variables to the general level of alexithymia (Table 5).

Table 5 - Model summary of hierarchical regression analyses that predicts the the general level of alexithymia

Measures	R ²	Adjusted R ²	SE	B	T	P-value
Country	0.37	0.13	0.13	0.16	2.14	0.04
Maternal care			0.13	-0.11	-1.42	0.16
Paternal care			0.11	-0.04	-0.59	0.56
Maternal overprotection			0.12	0.20	2.49	0.01
Paternal overprotection			0.13	0.14	2.06	0.04

Abbreviation: SE= Standard Error; β = Beta Standardized Coefficients

In order to explore the predictive variables of secure adult attachment, an analysis of hierarchical regression for separate blocks was used, including the following dimensions: (a) gender, age and country in the 1st block; (b) parenting in the 2nd block; (c) the possible presence of alexithymia in the 3rd block. Each block of independent variables was evaluated in terms of what they added to

the explanation of the variability of the dependent variable at the time of their inclusion, evaluating the weight of all predictors.

The analyses showed that the type of country, maternal overprotection and the general level of alexithymia were predictive variables to the tendency to avoidance within adult romantic relationships (Tab. 6).

Table 6 - Model summary of hierarchical regression analyses that predicts the level of avoidance in all groups

Model	Measures	R ²	Adjusted R ²	SE	B	T	P-value
1	Country	0.14	0.02	2.62	-0.14	-1.90	0.05
	Age			0.73	0.03	0.42	0.68
	Gender			2.61	-0.02	-0.30	0.77
2	Country	0.22	0.05	2.82	-0.09	-1.17	0.24
	Age			0.75	0.02	0.24	0.81
	Gender			2.73	0.00	0.00	1.00
	Maternal care			0.23	-0.09	-1.18	0.24
	Paternal care			0.20	0.00	0.02	0.98
	Maternal overprotection			0.21	-0.20	-2.31	0.02
	Paternal overprotection			0.22	0.10	1.36	0.18
2	Country	0.35	0.12	2.73	-0.13	-1.62	0.11
	Age			0.72	0.03	0.45	0.66
	Gender			2.63	0.01	0.13	0.90
	Maternal care			0.22	-0.07	-0.89	0.38
	Paternal care			0.19	0.01	0.16	0.87
	Maternal overprotection			0.21	-0.25	-3.06	<0.001
	Paternal overprotection			0.22	0.06	0.80	0.43
TAS- TOT	0.12	0.29	4.13	<0.001			

Abbreviation: SE= Standard Error; β = Beta Standardized Coefficients

In contrast, the predictors to the level of anxiety in adult attachment were the following dimensions (Tab. 7): the type of country, age variable and the level of paternal overprotection.

Table 7 - Model summary of hierarchical regression analyses that predicts the level of anxiety in all groups

Model	Measures	R ²	Adjusted R ²	SE	B	T	P-value
1	Country	0.23	0.05	2.76	0.18	2.53	0.01
	Age			0.77	0.14	2.08	0.04
	Gender			2.75	-0.06	-0.80	0.42
2	Country	0.34	0.12	2.91	0.13	1.68	0.10
	Age			0.77	0.10	1.43	0.16
	Gender			2.82	-0.10	-1.38	0.17
	Maternal care			0.23	-0.02	-0.23	0.82
	Paternal care			0.20	-0.10	-1.32	0.19
	Maternal overprotection			0.22	0.14	1.67	0.10
	Paternal overprotection			0.23	0.17	2.26	0.03
2	Country	0.48	0.23	2.91	0.13	1.68	0.10
	Age			0.77	0.10	1.43	0.16
	Gender			2.82	-0.10	-1.38	0.17
	Maternal care			0.23	-0.02	-0.23	0.82
	Paternal care			0.20	-0.10	-1.32	0.19
	Maternal overprotection			0.22	0.14	1.67	0.10
	Paternal overprotection			0.23	0.17	2.26	0.03
	TAS- TOT			2.91	0.13	1.68	0.10

Abbreviation: SE= Standard Error; β = Beta Standardized Coefficients

Discussion

The purposes of this study were the following: to investigate the relation between parenting, alexithymia and adult attachment styles; to measure the predictive variables of the adult attachment-related anxiety and avoidance; and to investigate the predictors to the level of alexithymia, comparing two samples of the Mediterranean area, Sicily (Italy) and Andalusia (Spain).

In reference to the parenting styles, the present study underlined gender and age differences in perceived parenting; in particular, among Andalusian students, the younger females seemed to show a higher perception of mother's care, in comparison to the younger males which manifested a lower perception of father's control.

The present study did not show a gender difference in the general level of alexithymia among Andalusian students; this data confirmed other research which shows no differences between girls and boys (Karukivi, 2011; Montebanocchi, Codispoti & Baldaro, 2004); although among Italian students, the younger males seemed to manifest a higher difficulty to identify emotion and feeling than females.

On the other hand, results showed age differences in regard to the different facets of alexithymia; in particular, older students (23 years old) seemed to consider themselves as less able to identify feelings. The data confirmed literature that demonstrates alexithymia is associated with increasing age (Mattila & Joukamaa, 2006).

Furthermore, there were age differences in regard to the adult attachment style; in particular, younger Italian students seemed to manifest a lower level of anxiety than older ones in intimate relationships, although the same difference was not manifested by Andalusian students.

The results of this study support the research hypothesis that alexithymia is associated with perceived parental bonding and attachment style. In particular, confirming the first hypothesis, results showed that Italian students seemed to manifest a higher perception than Spanish ones in paternal care and maternal overprotection.

The second research hypothesis appears partially confirmed because Italian students appeared to manifest a higher tendency to use the avoidance style than Spanish ones, who manifested a higher level of anxiety.

This finding could be explained by the fact that in Sicilian culture, roles within the family are extremely emphasized, and individuals have a strong need to meet social expectations. This process, which is very common among Southern Italians, to make a good impression, when interacting with other people, is very much a matter of showing integrity and bringing people to have respect for them; when they are not able to adopt to social pressure - that is, when they make a "bad impression"- people, therefore, feel shame. So exposure to perfectionism and to an authoritarian parenting style may bring the individual to the perception

of rigorous expectations, self-esteem linked to success, and fear of disappointing others and high level of anxiety and avoidance in close relationships (Pellerone et al., 2016b).

Confirming the third research hypothesis, a predictor of the Difficulty Identifying Feelings was found in elevated maternal overprotection, which also represents the predictive variable of the Difficulty Describing Feelings together with belonging to the Andalusian culture.

Furthermore, belonging to the Andalusian culture, and above all, having an elevated perception of the paternal and maternal overprotection could represent possible predictive variables to the general level of alexithymia. The data confirmed literature that demonstrates alexithymia is a pathology of the language of emotions and, therefore, as a deficit of the recognition of affective states.

The absence of words in alexithymia represents the feelings that have failed in the dialectical relationship. The recognition of internal states is, in fact, strictly determined by the interactive gesture between the child and the caregiver; the mother's empathic response represents the mirror of the child's emotions. In the case of weak parenting skills, the child resorts to self-regulation strategies which, over time, determine somatization and acting-out phenomena, rather than more mature cognitive processing in response to internal affective stimuli. Likewise, excessive parental control discourages verbal exploration and communicative exchange of feelings. In this sense, if the co-construction of mental states, mediated by language, is invaded and suppressed by the caregiver, the process of nomination and recognition of emotions does not develop. Therefore, parental styles contribute significantly to the etiology of alexithymia, because affective deficiency and excessive parental control significantly affect the development of the child's relational mind.

Conclusion

Finally, elevated paternal overprotection and reduced maternal care could be considered as predictors of externally oriented thinking. Why the dimension of paternal care did not influence the externally oriented cognitive style is unclear. One possibility is that the mother's parenting style is more influential in females, because Sicilian and Andalusian mothers typically spend more time with their children. In addition, the literature underlines that females report higher

disclosure with mothers than with fathers, and this element may influence their social competence and self-esteem.

In fact, the adult attachment is particularly influenced by the internal operative models; the constitution of MOIs is a process that derives from the early relationship with a caregiver and the MOIs model in relation to the responses of the latter. In the insecure attachment, the unavailability of a caregiver has the effect of forming dysfunctional patterns over time; the anxiety generated by the deactivation of attachment behavior becomes crucial also in future relationships, resulting in two main psychic maneuvers, namely anxiety and avoidance.

In particular, the present research showed that maternal control was a predictive factor in adult relationships; the excessive control of the mother would, in fact, discourage the development of autonomy, by trapping the adolescent in a suspended time, who would always be immature with respect to the evolutionary stages (Pellerone et al., 2015).

The intrusive pressure of a caregiver could determine in children, the tendency to perceive themselves as invaded subjects in their intimacy, and the fragility of the self-confines might be the main reason for the tendency to avoidance in adult romantic relationships.

In particular, with regard to attachment styles, we could assume that an insecure-avoiding style (which involves the emotional detachment of a caregiver and the sense of unlovability perceived by the child) tends to be transmitted in intimate future relationships; so the tendency to avoidance would be like defending oneself against a possible rejection by a partner, further deactivating the attachment behavior and incentivizing the object retrieval. Likewise, an anxiety-ambivalent parenting (in which affective measure is never predictable and commensurate with the situation) could lead to an anxiety-type attachment, which is not inclined to self-confidence and being overly dependent on the other. With particular reference to this study, excessive paternal control in the evolutionary age has proved to be a significant predictor of anxiety levels determined by proximity to the partner. It is possible to assume that an excess of paternal function can lead to a decrease in self-esteem level. Dependence on the partner and the fear of loss might reflect the internal operative model, which

implies an impotent self and dominant self, to which, however, their own value and affective system refer. Dependency, in fact, would be a reunification effect with authority, paradoxically considered a repair lymph to self-esteem, and, in the most serious cases, as a relational occasion of re-elaboration of evolutionary trauma.

The findings of this study provide considerable support for the utility of an attachment theory perspective on the complex interactions between adult attachment behaviour, the relationship quality and alexithymic characteristics such as cognitive and affective regulation deficit. Based on the results described herein, it is appropriate to emphasize the limits of this work, namely: the absence of a sampling method, which prevents the presence of a representative sample, the generalization of the results, and the external validity.

Additionally, this study assessed adult attachment style and alexithymia in high school and university students, the generalization of the findings to younger children or adults is unknown.

Furthermore, the alexithymia and the adult attachment type were measured through the use of self-report, which implies a risk of misleading information or social desirability.

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