

Research on Parenting Style, Alexithymia and Fear of Intimacy among College Students

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Abstract: This study mainly explored the relationship existing among parenting style, alexithymia, and fear of intimacy and the mediating role of alexithymia. Chinese Version of the Simplified Parenting Style Questionnaire (S-EMBU-C), Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) was conducted on 686 college students. (1) Results showed that the number of contemporary college students who perceived the emotional warmth of their parents' upbringing was above the medium level. College students' alexithymia scores were below the average level. College students scored above the average level of fear of intimacy. There was significant correlation between parenting style, Alexithymia and fear of intimacy. (2) Parental rejection and overprotection positively predicted intimacy fear of college students; Affective warmth of parents negatively predicted fear of intimacy. (3) Alexithymia played a mediating role between paternity rejection factor (p-value 0.016), maternal overprotection factor (p-value 0.005) and intimacy fear in college students. The influence of father's rejection and mother's over-protective parenting style on college students' fear of intimacy can also be realized through the mediating role of alexithymia. This finding has important implications for the effective intervention of intimate fear in college students.

1. Introduction

According to the theory of psychological development proposed by Erickson, individuals have the need to establish intimate relationships in early adulthood (18-30 years old), and college students are the typical population at this stage of psychological development. Therefore, they have a strong pursuit of intimate relationships, and the establishment of intimate relationships also plays a certain role in promoting the physical and mental growth of college students. A recent survey report on adult social interaction in the United States shows that about 17% of adults are afraid of establishing too close a relationship with others, and the proportion of college students is very high [1]. This fear of expressing emotion is the fear of intimacy. Among college students in China, the average score of intimacy fear among college students is 2.2, which is generally above the average level [2]. So what causes this fear of intimacy with others? What are some ways to improve intimacy phobia in college students? Therefore, it is important to explore the psychological

mechanism of intimacy fear and propose intervention measures to improve the intimacy fear of college students and promote their mental health and personality integrity.

Fear of intimacy comes from the definition proposed by Descutner et al: due to anxiety, individuals inhibit the exchange of emotions and ideas that are significant to them in communication with partners and significant others [3]. According to research, parental rearing style has a direct impact on individual mental health, and it was found that parental rearing style has a great impact on adolescent bipolar disorder, especially the severe punishment of the father [4]. Positive parenting can effectively reduce children's anxiety level [5]. Alexithymia is significantly positively correlated with fear of intimacy, and can significantly positively predict fear of intimacy [6]. Both parenting style and Alexithymia can affect the generation of intimate fear, so it is of great significance to study the relationship between them. This paper explores the general status and basic characteristics of college students' parental rearing style, alexithymia and fear of intimacy, discusses the relationship among the three, and verifies the mediating role of alexithymia among the three, so as to reveal the influence of emotion recognition and expression ability on fear of intimacy, and provide references for college students' self-growth and psychological counseling practice. From the level of family system, we can improve the parenting style, improve the intimate fear of college students, establish a good intimate relationship, and enrich the domestic research in the field of intimate fear.

2. Objects and Methods

2.1 Object of Study

This paper adopts convenient sampling method, through the "questionnaire star" online survey. A random questionnaire survey was conducted among college students in 3 different colleges and universities in Hefei, Anhui province. We set the maximum number of questionnaires to 700. When the quantity reaches the upper limit, the system prompts you to collect data. Then the data was collected, and some invalid questionnaires were eliminated, and 686 valid questionnaires were obtained.

2.2 Research Method

s-EMBU-C compiled by Swedish psychiatric expert Perris and amended by domestic Jiang jiang et al [7]. Jiang Jiang was adopted, with two sets of father version and mother version [8]. The contents of the two versions of the questionnaire were the same except that the object of the questionnaire was father and mother. The single questionnaire consisted of 21 questions and 42 projects, three dimensions: emotional warmth, rejection and overprotection. Four-point scoring is used, and section 15 is entitled reverse scoring. The higher the score of the dimension, the more likely the parents of the subjects were to adopt this parenting style.

TAT-20 compiled by Haviland et al. [9]. In China, it was modified by Li Kana but not modified, using a 5-point scale, 1(completely inconsistent)-5(completely consistent) [10]. The total score is between 20 and 100 points, the higher the score indicates the more serious alexithymia, which is divided into three dimensions: difficulty in recognizing emotions, difficulty in expressing emotions, and extroverted thinking, of which 4, 5, 10, 18, 19 are inverse subquestions.

The Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) was developed by Decutner and Thelen in 1991. This study was revised by Lin Wenwen et al in 2008. There are 35 entries, from "not at all like me" to "not at all like me.", one point - five points. The first 30 items required participants to imagine themselves in an intimate relationship, and the last five required participants to respond to actual situations in past relationships. FIS has no subscale, only one dimension. The score ranges from 35 to 175 points,

and the higher the score on the questionnaire, the higher the level of intimacy fear.

2.3 Statistical Treatment

The data were statistically processed by means of frequency, percentage, ranking, weighted average, etc. SPSS 27.0 was used to compare the responses of the subjects. $P < 0.05$ was considered to be statistically significant.

3. Results

3.1 The General Status of Parenting Style, Alexithymia and Fear of Intimacy in College Students

The study shows that the average score of emotional warmth parenting style of college students' mothers is 2.87, which is higher than the average score of 2.5. This means that the emotional warmth that contemporary college students feel from their mothers' parenting style is above the average level. The average score of father's emotional warmth parenting style was 2.57 points. This means that the fathers of the respondents had an above-average emotionally warm parenting style. Maternal overprotection factor and paternal overprotection factor ranked third and fourth, with mean values of 2.09 and 1.95, respectively. Both were 2.5 points below the average. Fifth and sixth are rejection factors for mothers and fathers, with an average of 1.38 and 1.32 respectively. The parenting styles of both parents are the same. The average score of the emotional warmth factor of both parents was the highest, followed by the overprotection factor and the lowest rejection factor. Mothers, however, scored higher on average than fathers in all three categories. See Table 1 for details.

Table 1: Type of Parenting Style Employed by Respondents Parents n= 686

	Paternal			Maternal		
	Mean	Std.	Rank	Mean	Std.	Rank
Rejection Dimension	1.32	.427	3	1.38	.464	3
Emotional Warmth	2.57	.675	1	2.87	.714	1
Over Protection	1.95	.434	2	2.09	.502	2

Legend: The higher the score, the more is the specific parenting style exhibited by the parents

In gender grouping, the P-value of father rejection factor and father overprotection factor is 0, and the P-value is lower than 0.05, indicating that there are obvious gender differences in father rejection factor (female: 1.28, male: 1.41) and father overprotection factor (female: 1.91, male: 2.03) of the respondents. However, there was no gender difference in fathers' emotional warmth factor (girls: 2.60, boys: 2.54). This shows that there is no difference in the emotional warmth and support factors of fathers towards boys and girls, and both are above the theoretical average; Fathers often use negative parenting styles such as rejection and denial to boys; The scores of paternal overprotection factor showed marginal difference in gender, which showed that fathers gave more protection to boys.

The P-value of the father's affective warmth factor is 0.003, indicating that subjects from urban (2.71), small and medium-sized towns (2.65) and rural (2.50) have obvious differences in their father's affective warmth parenting style. It shows that fathers from cities and small and medium-sized towns have higher scores of emotional warmth and support for their children than rural college students.

There were obvious differences between male and female parenting styles of the mothers of the respondents. The emotional warmth of the mothers for girls (2.92) was higher than that for boys

(2.78). However, mothers' rejection (1.43) and overprotection (2.20) of boys were higher than those of girls (1.35 and 2.02). In grade grouping, the P-values of mother's rejection factor and mother's emotional warmth factor are 0.023 and 0.014, respectively; there are obvious differences in mother's rejection factor and mother's emotional warmth in grades (freshman to seniors). The study showed that the total mean of the mother rejection factor (1.90) in seniors was higher than that in freshmen (1.39), sophomores (1.39) and juniors (1.37), indicating that seniors experienced more mother rejection parenting styles than juniors. The score of maternal emotional warmth factor is the highest in freshman (2.92), followed by junior (2.88), sophomore (2.73), and senior (2.43), indicating that compared with senior students, mothers provide more emotional warmth to freshman students and least emotional warmth to senior students. In the only child group, the P-value of the mother's overprotection factor is 0.030, the mother's overprotection factor is significantly different in whether the mother is the only child or not. It shows that mothers overprotect and control their only children more.

Table 2: Respondent's Level of Alexithymia and Fear of Intimacy n=686

	Mean	Stdev.	Interpretation	Rank
Affective Recognition Difficulty	18.07	.830	Low	2
Affective Expression Difficulty	14.31	.492	Low	3
Dimension of extroverted Thinking	25.04	.421	Moderate	1
Overall	57.43	8.852	Possible Alexithymia	
Fear of Intimacy Composite Mean	111.98	12.279	High	

Legend: Per subscale: 5 – 20 Low, 21 – 30 Moderate, 31 – 35 High

Alexithymia Total: 20 – 51 (low), 52 – 60 (possibly alexithymia), 61 – 74 moderate, 75 – 100 high

Fear of Intimacy Total: 35 – 60 low, 61 – 90 Moderate, 91 – 120 high, 121 – 150 very high, 151 – 175 extremely high.

Table 2 shows the current status of alexithymia of the respondents. The mean score from the total score is 57.43, the standard deviation is 8.852, and the mean score of each item is 2.42. It can be seen that the total score of emotional disorders of college students is below the medium level. The mean score of three dimensions (Affective Recognition Difficulty, Affective Expression Difficulty, Dimension of extroverted Thinking) is obtained by excluding the number of items in each dimension. Affective Recognition Difficulty is 2.58, Affective Expression Difficulty is 2.86, Dimension of extroverted "Thinking" is 3.13. Affective Recognition Difficulty and Affective Expression Difficulty are lower than the average 3, Dimension of extroverted Thinking had a score greater than the theoretical mean of 3.

Table 2 shows the current situation of intimacy fear among respondents. The mean score from the total score is 111.98, the standard deviation is 12.279, and the mean score of each item is 3.20. Intimacy fear has only one dimension. It can be seen that the intimacy fear of college students in this study is higher than the average level 3, indicating that the intimacy fear of college students is relatively high.

As seen on the table, there are significant differences in emotion recognition difficulties of college students in gender, age and whether they are single. The P value of emotion recognition difficulty of college students in boys (2.67) and girls (2.53) is 0.028, with a significant difference. Boys' emotion recognition difficulty is higher than that of girls. There was a gender difference in extraverted thinking (P=0). The total average score of extraverted thinking in girls (3.12) was higher than that in boys (3.05), indicating that girls paid more attention to external details and ignored internal feelings. College students over 22 years old have lower difficulty in emotion recognition than college students in younger age groups (under 22 years old). The emotion recognition

difficulty of single people (2.62) was higher than that of non-single people (2.41). There are significant differences in college students' emotional expression difficulties in terms of grade, location of Residence and length of love. This study found that the difficulty of affective expression was the highest in grade one (2.89), and gradually decreased with the increase of grade, and the difficulty of affective expression was the lowest in grade four. The difficulty of emotional expression of urban students (2.80), rural students (2.83) and small and medium-sized town students (2.97) indicates that the difficulty of emotional expression of urban students is the lowest, and that of small and medium-sized town students is the highest. The emotional expression difficulties of college students who fell in love for less than 3 months (2.87), 3-6 months (2.88) and 1 to 3 years (2.83) were significantly higher than those who fell in love for more than 3 years (2.60), indicating that the longer the love duration, the lower the score of emotional expression difficulties. There is a significant difference in the gender of extroverted thinking, girls' extroverted thinking is significantly higher than that of boys, indicating that compared with boys, girls lack more awareness of the inner world and are more rigid in the details of external things. There were significant differences in the total score of alexithymia in grade and whether single: Grade one (mean 2.90), grade two (mean 2.84), grade three (mean 2.78) and grade four (mean 2.55), indicating that grade one had the highest score of alexithymia, and with the increase of grade, alexithymia decreased. The total mean value of single college students with alexithymia (2.89) is higher than that of non-single college students (2.78). From the above results, it can be seen that the P-value of intimacy fear in gender grouping is 0.001, indicating that there is a significant difference in the gender of intimacy fear. This study shows that the average score of boys' total score is 3.14, which is lower than that of girls' total score of 3.23, indicating that the level of intimacy fear of both boys and girls exceeds the theoretical average 3, the level of intimacy fear of both boys and girls is above the medium level, and the level of intimacy fear of girls is higher than that of boys. It shows that female college students experience more fear of intimacy than male college students.

3.2 Correlation Analysis of Parental Rearing Style, Alexithymia and Fear of Intimacy in College Students

Table 3 shows the correlation analysis among parenting style, alexithymia and fear of intimacy. The results show that father's rejection of parenting style was significantly positively correlated with college students' fear of intimacy, with correlation coefficient 0.104 ($P < 0.01$). Paternal overprotection was positively correlated with college students' fear of intimacy, with correlation coefficient 0.087 ($P < 0.05$).

There was a significant negative correlation between mothers' emotional warmth parenting style and college students' fear of intimacy, and the correlation coefficient was 0.106 ($p < 0.01$) and there was a significant positive correlation between mother's overprotection and college students' fear of intimacy, and the correlation coefficient was 0.140 ($p < 0.01$);

Alexithymia and its dimensions were significantly negatively correlated with the fear of intimacy among college students, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.287-0.433 ($p < 0.01$) and paternal rejection and overprotective parenting styles were positively correlated with difficulty in emotion recognition, difficulty in emotion expression and total score of Alexithymia, with the correlation coefficient ranging from 0.114 to 0.31 ($p < 0.01$);

In addition, there was a significant negative correlation between father's emotional warmth parenting style and emotion recognition difficulty, extroverted thinking and total score of Alexithymia, and the correlation coefficient was between 0.103 and 0.221 ($p < 0.01$). Mother's rejection and overprotective parenting style were positively correlated with difficulty in emotion recognition, difficulty in emotion expression and total score of alexithymia, and the correlation

coefficient was between 0.098-0.296 ($p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$); Lastly, there was a significant negative correlation between maternal emotional warmth parenting style and emotion recognition difficulty and extroverted thinking in Alexithymia, and the correlation coefficient was between 0.169 and 0.200 ($p < 0.01$).

Table 3: Correlation Matrix of the Variables of the Study n=686

	Affective Recognition		Affective Expression Difficult		Dimension of extroverted thinking		Overall Alexithymia		Fear of Intimacy	
	r_{xy}	p-value	r_{xy}	p-value	r_{xy}	p-value	r_{xy}	p-value	r_{xy}	p-value
Paternal Rejection	.310**	.000	.114**	.003	.008	.831	.238**	.000	.104**	.006
Paternal Emo.Warmth	-.221**	.000	-.031	.416	.134**	.000	-.103**	.007	.060	.113
Paternal Over Protection	.290**	.000	.115**	.003	-.012	.748	.218**	.000	.087*	.023
Maternal Rejection	.283**	.000	.119**	.002	-.051	.182	.200**	.000	.065	.091
Maternal Emo.Warmth	-.169**	.000	-.024	.523	.200**	.000	-.042	.273	.106**	.006
Maternal Over Protection	.296**	.000	.098*	.010	.044	.247	.239**	.000	.140**	.000
Affective Recognition Diff.	1		.576**	.000	.163**	.000	.879**	.000	.294**	.000
Affective Expression Diff.	.576**	.000	1		.265**	.000	.757**	.000	.287**	.000
Dimension of Extroverted	.163**	.000	.265**	.000	1		.561**	.000	.423**	.000
Overall Alexithymia	.879**	.000	.757**	.000	.561**	.000	1		.433**	.000
Fear of Intimacy	.294**	.000	.287**	.000	.423**	.000	.433**	.000	1	

Legend: Relationship is significant at 0.05 alpha level; those highlighted in green is significant

Research has found that Alexithymia regulates the relationship between parental style (rejection and overprotection) and fear of intimacy, as shown in Figure 1. For parenting styles and emotional development, it means that parents who are emotionally distant, dismissive, or critical can hinder a child's ability to identify and express their emotions. This can lead to emotional dysregulation and difficulty forming secure attachments. In terms of overprotection, when parents are overly controlling or intrusive, children may learn to suppress their emotions to avoid conflict or disapproval. This can also contribute to difficulties in emotional awareness and expression.

For Alexithymia as a "Mediator" this suggests that when present, becomes a middle ground between parental styles and fear of intimacy. Children exposed to rejection or overprotection may develop alexithymia as a coping mechanism. This difficulty in understanding and communicating their emotions can fuel fear of intimacy. This likely means that individuals with alexithymia may struggle with intimate relationships due to difficulties connecting emotionally with others and recognizing their own needs and desires. Furthermore, there can be other psychological issues where alexithymia can be associated with various mental health problems like depression, anxiety, and difficulty regulating emotions. Alexithymia can mediate the relationship between parental

attachment styles and fear of intimacy.

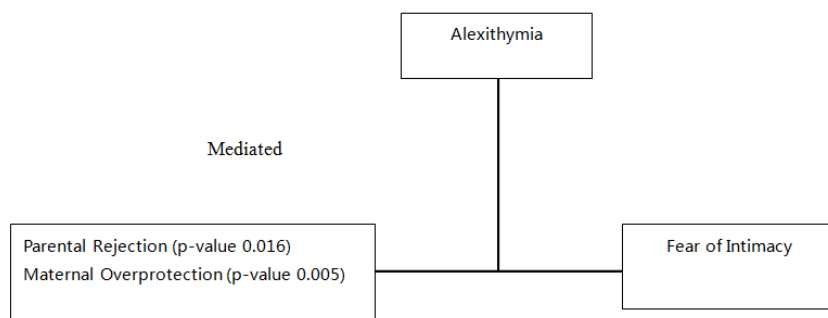


Figure 1: Mediating Role of Alexithymia

4. Discussion

Chinese college students perceived that their parents' employ emotional warmth parents style, with possible alexithymia and high fear of intimacy which suggests that the respondents may be experiencing difficulty identifying and expressing their emotions. This is consistent with the study of Yi Qianwen [11], the score of parents' emotional warmth is the highest, and the scores of parental overprotection ranked second, Parents' rejection scores were the lowest. And the trend of the three dimensions was consistent.

Father's rejection and overprotection parenting style was significant on respondents' sex, while emotional warmth parenting style is significant in terms of respondents' place of origin. This is basically consistent with the study of Wang Helin [12]. In terms of negative parenting styles, there are also significant differences in the total scores of male and female students. It shows that fathers tend to overprotect and reject boys more than girls. Meanwhile, mother's rejection, and emotional warmth were found significant to sex and grade level while overprotection of the mother has significant effect on whether the mother is an only child or not. This is consistent with the study of Zhang Yan [13], and the differences in scores of rejection, overprotection and emotional warmth are statistically significant ($P < 0.01$), which shows that the scores of males in maternal emotional warmth factors are significantly lower than those of females, while the scores of negative parenting styles (punishment, rejection and overprotection) are significantly higher than those of females.

There were significant differences in the total score of alexithymia in grade and whether single. This is consistent with the research of Pingjie [1], which shows that the score of alexithymia in freshmen is significantly higher than that of alexithymia in juniors, seniors, masters and doctors. There are significant differences in the fear of intimacy between the sexes of college students. This is consistent with the study of Xu Mingqian [14], which shows that the level of intimacy fear of college students is significantly different in gender ($P=0$), and the level of intimacy fear of female students is significantly higher than that of male students.

There was a significant positive correlation between parental rejection and overprotective parenting style, alexithymia and intimate fear of college students and a significant negative correlation between parents' emotional warmth parenting style, alexithymia and intimate fear. Parental rejection and overprotection positively predicted intimacy fear of college students; Affective warmth of parents negatively predicted fear of intimacy. This is consistent with the study of Ma Yanjie [15], which shows that fear of intimacy is closely related to mother's parenting style, and the score of fear of intimacy is positively correlated with the score of rejection dimension in mother's parenting style ($r=0.28$, $P<0.01$), and negatively correlated with the score of emotional warmth dimension in mother's parenting style ($r=-0.31$, $P<0.01$). It was positively correlated with

the score of overprotective dimension in maternal parenting style ($r=0.20$, $P<0.01$).

Alexithymia played a chain mediating role between father's rejection, mother's over-protective parenting style and college students' fear of intimacy, that is, the influence of father's rejection and mother's over-protective parenting style on college students' fear of intimacy can also be realized through the mediating role of alexithymia. This is consistent with the research of Ping jie [1], which suggests that the influence of parental control and caring parenting styles on college students' fear of intimacy can also be realized through the mediating role of alexithymia and self-esteem. According to Bowlby's attachment theory, individuals are always influenced by early social interactions with their parents and emotional interactions with their caregivers throughout their life development. When parents give their children enough trust and praise, it is easier for them to perceive the emotional state of others, so as to establish intimate relationships with others. According to relevant studies, parents' negative parenting styles have produced different physical and mental problems for their children. Melis and Selcuk(2018)found that authoritarian parenting style will increase the probability of obesity and overweight in children [16]. The strict type will lead to higher likelihood of children's health risk behaviors [17]. Emotional warmth from parents can lead to healthier eating behaviors in children [18]. If parents adopt an authoritarian or laissez-faire parenting model, their children are prone to aggressive behavior [19]. It was proved that adolescents with supportive parenting had stronger self-perceived learning ability, while those with neglectful parenting had lower learning ability [20]. Individuals who grew up under benign parenting had a sense of security or emotional efficacy, and will experience more happiness [21]; Maternal rejection and control have predictive effects on antisocial personality during adolescence [22], whereas warm families and good parenting styles are conducive to promoting children's strong personality [23]. According to Zhang Chunyu's research, Alexithymia has cognitive and social mechanisms, among which family environment is an important reason for children's alexithymia. There is a significant positive correlation between college students' alexithymia and their fear of intimacy [1]. Therefore, the cognition of emotional information explains the causes of alexithymia, and provides a way to improve the intimate fear of college students.

Therefore, it is of practical significance to propose intervention programs from three perspectives: parental rearing style, alexithymia and fear of intimacy. This paper improves the parenting mode of "father refusing mother" and optimizes the educational function of parents. This paper promotes the cultivation of college students' ability of emotion recognition and emotion management, and the ability of establishing interpersonal trust and intimate relationship in practice.

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