

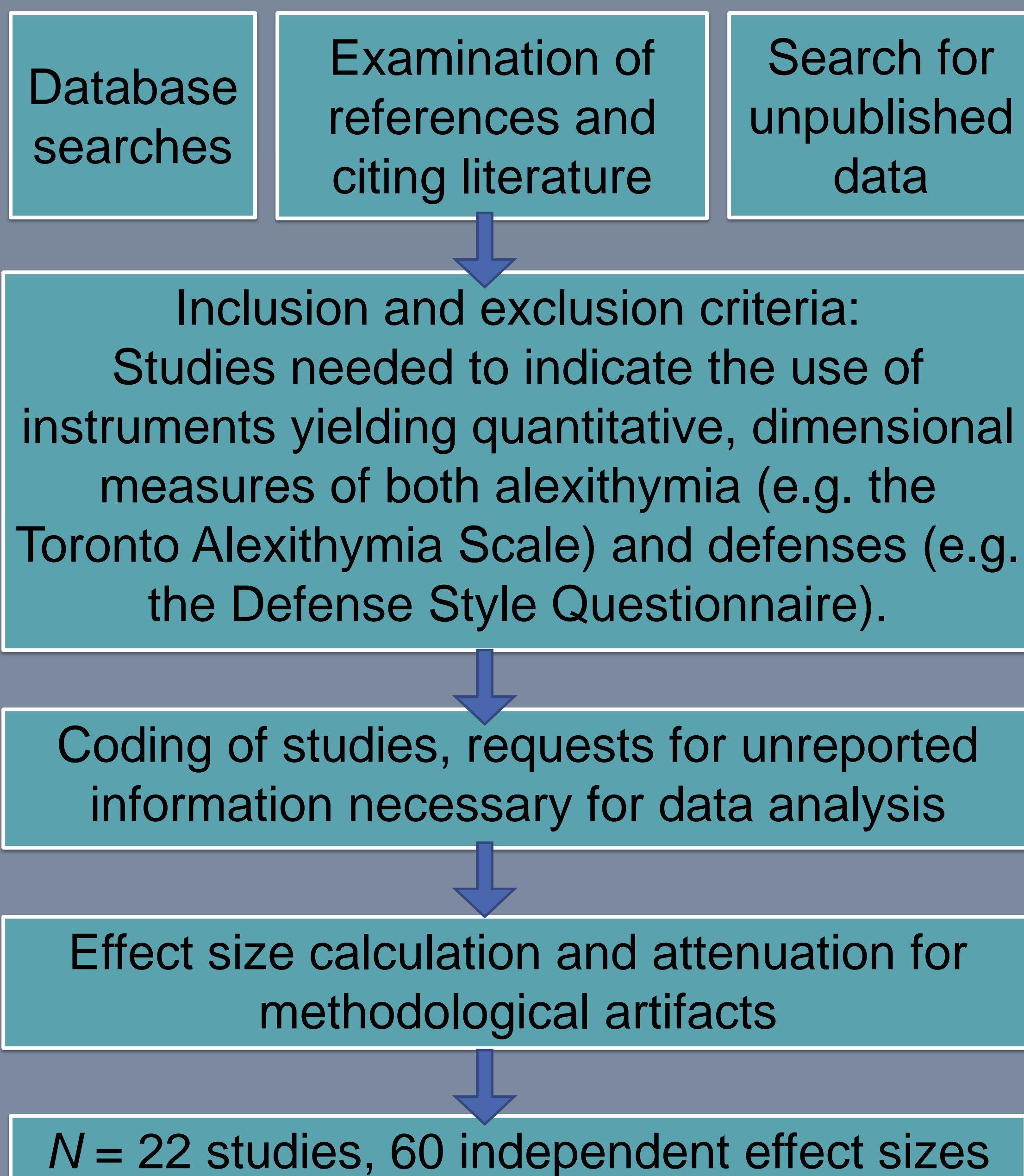
Alexithymia and Psychological Defenses: A Meta-Analysis

madeline a. huffstickler, BA, The George Washington University

Introduction

- Alexithymia is a multidimensional construct that includes difficulties identifying feelings, difficulties describing feelings, and externally oriented thinking (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997).
- Clinically, patients high in alexithymia often present with flat affect, minimal bodily or facial expressiveness, and monotonous tone of voice. Such patients typically inspire countertransference responses of boredom, frustration, and feelings of inner deadness in the clinician.
- The intrapsychic dynamics of alexithymia involve a breakdown in the symbolic elaboration of affective states and the foreclosure of emotional experience.
- Psychoanalytic literature suggests that alexithymia reflects the use of predominantly immature, presymbolic defenses such as splitting and disavowal (McDougall, 1982).

Methods



Results

Mean Correlations between Alexithymia and Defense Styles

Defense Style	Fixed-Effects			Random-Effects		
	r	SE	p	r	SE	p
Total	.22	0.01	<.00001	.20	0.06	.0007
Immature	.55	0.02	<.00001	.54	0.11	<.00001
Neurotic	.33	0.02	<.00001	.30	0.12	.01
Mature	-.34	0.02	<.00001	-.30	0.11	.008

Heterogeneity of Effect Sizes

Significant heterogeneity in effect sizes was observed for all effect sizes, $Q(59) = 1829.74$, $p < .00001$, and when only including effect sizes indexing the association between alexithymia and immature, neurotic, or mature defenses, $Q(47) = 1556.63$, $p < .0001$.

Moderator Analyses

Psychological maturity emerged as a significant moderator of the association between alexithymia and psychological defensiveness, $Q(11) = 1502.66$, $p < .00001$. The difference between each of the three defense styles was statistically significant.

defense style	mean r
immature	.55
neurotic	.33
mature	-.34

The diagnostic category of the study participants also emerged as a significant moderator, $Q(2) = 6.77$, $p = .03$. The association between alexithymia and defensiveness was greater for participants with a mental versus physical illness diagnosis, and was greater for participants with no diagnosis versus physical illness.

diagnosis	mean r
mental	.23
physical	.11
no diagnosis	.22

Discussion

- The current study observed a moderate positive association between alexithymia and psychological defensiveness.
- The diagnostic category of the primary study participant sample as well as the psychological maturity level of defenses significantly moderated the association between alexithymia and defensiveness.
- Alexithymia demonstrated a strong positive association with use of immature defenses, a moderate positive association with neurotic defenses, and a moderate negative association with mature defenses.
- These findings provide support for the psychoanalytic conceptualization of alexithymia as a manifestation of archaic defensive processes.

References

- McDougall, J. (1982). Alexithymia: A psychoanalytic viewpoint. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 38, 81-90. doi:10.1159/000287617
- Taylor, G. R., Bagby, R. M., & Parker, J. D. (1997). *Disorders of affect regulation: Alexithymia in medical and psychiatric illness*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.