Trait emotional intelligence and social deviance in males and females

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

High trait Emotional Intelligence (trait EI) is often considered a positive attribute, but some studies have suggested that it may facilitate deception or manipulative relational behaviours, and that the effects differ according to gender. In two studies, we examine the influence of trait EI factors on social deviance, from adolescence through to adulthood. A total of 455 participants (243 females) completed the Trait EI Questionnaire and provided self-reports of deviant behaviours during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Study 1) or in adulthood (Study 2). For males, adolescent and emerging adult deviance related negatively to Emotionality and Self-control, in accordance with positive views of trait EI, but in adulthood deviance was predicted only by high Sociability. For females, the opposite pattern was seen, with high levels of Emotionality and Sociability associated with deviance in adolescence and high Sociability in emerging adulthood. Adult female social deviance was negatively correlated with Self-control and Emotionality, replicating the adolescent male profile. Trait EI is not inevitably positive, and is an under-researched personality determinant of social deviance. Further consideration of the developmental trajectory of trait EI may provide insights to inform intervention with at-risk individuals in adolescence, and beyond.

In defining the construct, it is important to note the distinction between trait EI, as assessed by self-report, and ability EI which is measured by maximum performance tests in a similar way to intelligence (Petrides et al., 2007). While both emphasise managing and understanding emotions, the conceptual differences between the two are reflected in empirical data which has shown very low correlations between measures of the two constructs (O’Connor & Little, 2003; Warwick & Nettelbeck, 2004). A review by Zeidner, Matthews, and Roberts (2012) has indicated that self-report measures of EI appear to be more robustly related to health and well-being criteria than are ability-based measures and the present studies are concerned with this trait EI approach.

In the present studies, we are interested in the relationship between individual differences in trait EI and socially deviant behaviour. For this purpose, we define social deviance in terms of the description of anti-social behaviour offered by Rutter (2003) who suggested that it be considered as nonconformity, disregard or unwillingness to adhere to rules and obligations imposed by society or social organizations. As such, it may include criminal acts which violate specific laws, but also behaviours which are not in themselves illegal but which contradict the social norms of the culture in which the individual resides, for instance, cheating in exams bullying and name-calling can be classed as anti-social by this definition. As such, occurrence of deviant behaviour is not the sole preserve of forensic samples and can be measured within a...
general population. It is notable that thrust of antisocial behaviour legislation in the UK over the last two decades has been aimed at de-
viant, non-criminal behaviours. For instance, the Antisocial Behaviour Order and subsequent Antisocial Behaviour Injunction legislation was
designed to address activities such as drunken or threatening beha-
vior, vandalism, graffiti or playing loud music at night using civil
crimes rather than criminal sanctions (Home Office, 2014). Socially
deviant behaviours have been associated with low scores on measures of
a number of emotional personality factors including emotional and
behavioural self-regulation (Downey, Johnston, Hansen, Birney, & Stough, 2010 (Eisenberg et al., 1996; Moffitt, Arsenaut, Belsky, et al., 2011),
empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2007; Marshall & Marshall, 2011; Milojević & Dimitrijević, 2014) as well as
poor mentalisation (Fonagy et al., 1997) impulsivity and sensation
seeking (Gomá-i-Freixanet, 1995; Romero, Luengo, & Sobral, 2001).
Unsurprisingly therefore, low trait EI is also claimed to be a risk factor
for various maladaptive behaviours, including those considered deviant
or antisocial (Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2009), including bullying (Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2012) and aggressive behaviour in adolescents (Gugliandolo, Costa, Cuzzocrea, & Larcan, 2015).

Furthermore, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting a
darker side to trait EI and several studies have suggested that it may be
used as a tool for deception or manipulative relational behaviours and
that the effects differ according to gender. Grieve and Panebianco (2013) reported that male participants with higher levels of trait EI,
social information processing, indirect aggression, and self-serving
cognitive distortions were more likely to exploit others. Jones and
Paulhus (2011) suggested that good interpersonal skills are necessary in
order to successfully manipulate others: without understanding others' emotions and being able to influence them, manipulative individuals
would simply not be able to achieve their goals. As well as such in-
terpersonal talents facilitating the manipulation of others, an added advantage is the ability to behave in such a socially skilled manner that
the aggressor can appear innocent of any wrongdoing or harmful in-
tention (Björkqvist, 1994). Hence the desired goal is attained without
attribution of blame, and therefore at no cost to the perpetrator.

In one of the few studies to consider gender-differences in the
relationship between socially deviant behaviours and trait EI, Bacon, Burak, and Rann (2014) collected self-reports of adolescent delinquent
behaviour in a young student population aged 18–25. They found that
male participants with higher global trait EI scores reported lower levels
delinquency, however, high trait EI females reported higher levels of delinquency. These results were interpreted as reflecting the protective influence of self-regulation (emotional and behavioural) and
low impulsivity in males, while for females, Bacon et al. (2014) pos-
tulated that an understanding of others’ emotions facilitates emotionally manipulative behaviours and relational aggression. Such
deviant, but not criminal, behaviours are known to be prevalent among
adolescent females, as opposed to males where physically aggressive
behaviour is more common (Archer, 2004; Björkqvist, 1994; Österman et al., 1998; Viding, Simmonds, Petrides, & Frederickson, 2009). Most
recently, Bacon and Regan (2016) showed that high trait EI females
who report deviant behaviours also score highly on aspects of emo-
tional manipulation, assessed with the Manipulating the Emotions of
Others Scale (Austin & O’Donnell, 2013) and also on Machiavellianism,
are personal trait typified by deceptive and manipulative social beha-
vour (Christie & Geis, 1970).

However, a major limitation of this work is that it is focusses only
on global trait EI scores. As trait EI is a multidimensional construct, analysis
at its global level cannot fully encapsulate potential variation in emo-
tional perceptions and may mask differential relationships between the
trait EI facets and other criteria of interest (Petrides et al., 2016). For
instance, Zeidner et al. (2012) review research which has suggested that
it is the emotional understanding and regulation aspects of EI specifically
that protect against addiction, a key factor in many acts of deviance. A recent study (Milojević, Dimitrijević, Marjanović, & Dimitrijević, 2016)
compared trait EI scores in a sample of convicted juvenile delinquents
and a non-forensic sample. They found that the delinquents showed
lower scores on the Emotionality, Well-being and Self-control trait EI
factors. Research using ability EI measures have found similar results
(Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004; Hayes & Reilly, 2013). These results
explicate Bacon et al.’s (2014) findings for males but do not consider
female antisocial behaviour.

Our Study 1 addresses these issues in a replication of Bacon et al.
(2014) where we examine retrospective reports of adolescent deviant
behaviour (between ages 12 and 18) but using a full-scale trait EI mea-
sure that allowed for the examination of scores on the four subfactors,
rather than simply the global score. The first aim of Study 1 therefore
was to test Bacon et al.’s (2014) proposal that a positive relationship
between trait EI and adolescent deviance in young females reflects a
malignant and self-serving utilisation of emotional understanding and,
conversely, that the suggested protective effect of high trait EI in young
males reflects low impulsivity and high self-regulation. In terms of the
four sub-factors of trait EI, if Bacon et al.’s thesis is correct we should
observe a negative association between levels of deviant behaviour and
Self-control in males and positive association between levels of deviant
behaviour and both Emotionality and Sociability in females. However, it
is possible that trait EI factors might be differentially implicated in de-
viat behaviours of different kinds, for instance skiving school compared
to a violent assault. As such we developed the methodology in a further
way in order to test this possibility, categorising the behaviours into two
types according to whether they reflect criminal conduct (behaviours
generally associated with juvenile delinquency or criminality, such as
vandalism, theft and arson) and behaviours reflecting more mainstream
deviance such as exam cheating or verbal bullying.

Furthermore, we extended the line of enquiry by also obtaining
reports of more current deviance in emerging adulthood, ages 18–25.
Arnett (2000) argues that this stage is distinct from both adolescence
and adulthood and is distinguished by relative independence from so-
cial roles and normative expectations. Individuals in this stage are no
longer fully dependent on their families or carers but have not yet en-
tered into the full responsibilities of adulthood. As such, this lifestyle
is often typified by exploration of different potential life directions in
personal, professional and worldview domains. The few studies which
have considered crime/social deviance in this specific lifestyle have
tended to focus on social and life circumstances (e.g. Piquero, Brane, Mazerolle, & Haapanen, 2002) rather than personality traits. As such,
the second aim of Study 1 was to examine whether the trait EI profiles
observed for socially deviant adolescents remain stable into emerging
adulthood.

Study 2 examined the trait EI profile of socially deviant adults.
Firstly, we expected that both types of deviant behaviour would be re-
ported at lower levels than in Study 1 as most individuals desist with age.
Secondly, we expected that individuals reporting higher levels of de-
viance would continue to show poor Self-control (males) and
Emotionality (females) in terms of trait EI scores. Going beyond Bacon et al.’s (2014) findings, in Study 2 we expand the research into an older
non-student population in order to examine trait EI profiles in those
committing deviant acts as adults. While for most adolescents, some form
of antisocial or deviant behaviour is part of a relatively benign and short-
lived episode in the transition to adulthood, Moffitt (e.g. 1993; 2006)
had identified a group who term life-course persistent offenders in whom
antisocial behaviour and crime persists into adulthood. Although Mof-
fitt's account proposes that many of the main determinants of life-course
offending are social, she also suggests that such offenders may fail to
develop the prosocial and self-regulatory cognitions which contribute to
desistance in late adolescence for most individuals. An alternative ac-
count, the antisocial propensity theory (Lahey & Waldman, 2003) argues
for a general lifetime developmental trajectory within which three dis-
propositional dimensions in particular (prosociality, daring and negative
emotionality) may predispose to offending. Overall, whether or not
adolescents can be considered a separate category of offender from those

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