



Does emotional intelligence as ability predict transformational leadership? A multilevel approach ^{☆,☆☆}

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ABSTRACT

This study assesses to what extent emotional intelligence as ability (EI) can predict transformational leadership. Norwegian executives (N = 104) completed measures of personality (NEO PI-R) and EI (MSCEIT), and were rated on transformational leadership (MLQ 5X) by subordinates (N = 459). This study improves upon previous studies in three ways: First, because the validity and reliability of the scores from MSCEIT has been questioned, an alternative set of scales from MSCEIT were included, which provide reliable and interpretable scores (Føllesdal & Hagtvet, 2009). Second, in addition to personality, general mental ability (GMA) was controlled for by utilizing Monte Carlo studies. Third, a multilevel approach was used to analyze the scores, due to their hierarchical structure. Neither the four branch scores, nor the Total EI score from MSCEIT predicted transformational leadership. A suppression effect was found, however, among two subscales from Perceiving Emotions. The validity of scores from MSCEIT is questioned.

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1. Introduction

Emotional intelligence (EI) is assumed to be an important characteristic in leadership, particularly in transformational leadership (Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000; George, 2000). There exist many different conceptualizations of EI, e.g., as a set of abilities (Mayer & Salovey, 1997), a set of personality traits (Bar-On, 1997), or a mixture of effective leader behaviors and personality traits (Boyatzis, Goleman, & Rhee, 2000). Many researchers, however, argue that EI should be conceptualized and measured as a set of abilities, distinct from personality traits and leader behavior. A recent meta-analysis, however, found that EI measured as ability was unrelated to subordinates' ratings of EI (Harms & Credé, 2010), suggesting that EI as ability might not be important in transformational leadership. There are three limitations with previous research that will be addressed in the present study, in order to assess more thoroughly the relationship between EI as ability and transformational leadership.

First, EI as ability is usually measured by the Mayer, Salovey, Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002), which is the only performance test measuring the entire four-branch ability model of EI. Many of the scales from this test, however, provide scores with low reliability, that are difficult to interpret, and with questionable validity (Fiori & Antonakis, 2011; Føllesdal & Hagtvet, 2009; Keele & Bell, 2008; Palmer, Gignac, Manocha, & Stough, 2005; Rode et al., 2008; Rossen, Kranzler, & Algina, 2008). The use of these scales may therefore lead to inconsistent and unexpected findings, e.g., that EI as ability is unrelated to transformational leadership. Føllesdal and Hagtvet (2009), however, identified a set of alternative scales in the MSCEIT that provide reliable and interpretable scores. The present study will use these scales, in addition to the standard scales from MSCEIT, in order to assess the relationship with transformational leadership.

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^{☆☆} The data from the MSCEIT have also been used in Føllesdal, H., & Hagtvet, K. A. (2009). Emotional Intelligence as ability: The MSCEIT from the perspective of generalizability theory. *Intelligence*, 37, 94–105, which, along with the present study, was part of Føllesdal's doctoral dissertation.

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Second, studies assessing the relationship between EI as ability and transformational leadership have seldom controlled for both personality traits and general mental ability (GMA). This is necessary in order to demonstrate that EI is a unique characteristic that is important in leadership (see e.g., Antonakis, Ashkanasy, & Dasborough, 2009; Walter, Cole, & Humphrey, 2011). The present study will therefore control for the personality factors in the Five Factor Model of personality (FFM) and GMA when assessing the relationship between EI as ability and transformational leadership. GMA will be controlled for by the use of Monte Carlo studies.

Third, studies assessing the relationship between EI as ability and transformational leadership seldom take into account the multilevel nature of scores from measures of transformational leadership. That is, transformational leadership is often measured by subordinates' ratings of their leader, which introduces dependencies in the scores. Ignoring such dependencies may lead to biased parameter estimates and wrong conclusions about how the scores relate to other variables (Bliese & Hanges, 2004; Hox, 2002), such as leaders' EI. The present study will assess the relationship between EI as ability and transformational leadership within a multilevel framework, which takes such dependencies into account.

In the following, we will first describe transformational leadership and the theoretical relationship with EI, and some empirical findings regarding this relationship. Second, we will look at some issues that may question the validity of the scores from MSCEIT, and explain why it may be appropriate to assess the predictive validity of an alternative set of scales from MSCEIT. Third, we will explain the need for a multilevel framework when assessing the relationship between the scores on transformational leadership and EI as ability. Finally, we will report and discuss results from a study assessing the relationship between scores from MSCEIT and transformational leadership, in a sample of 104 Norwegian executives rated on transformational leadership by subordinates, controlling for the FFM and GMA.

2. Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership is a type of leader behavior that consists of four components (Bass, 1997; Bass & Riggio, 2006): *Idealized Influence* describes leaders who behave in ways that allow them to serve as role models for their subordinates and who are admired, respected, and trusted. *Inspirational Motivation* describes leaders who behave in ways that motivate and inspire subordinates, e.g., by providing meaning and challenge to their work, and establishing inspiring visions. *Intellectual Stimulation* describes leaders who stimulate their followers to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching situations in new ways. Finally, *Individualized Consideration* describes leaders who create new learning opportunities along with a supportive climate, who recognize individual differences in terms of needs and desires (Bass, 1997; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Researchers have tried to identify individual differences that may explain variance in transformational leadership. A meta-analysis reported that the five broad personality factors in the FFM explain about 9% of the variance in transformational leadership (Bono & Judge, 2004). When it comes to GMA, a recent meta-analysis reported a correlation of .16 (corrected for unreliability) between transformational leadership and GMA, suggesting that GMA only explain 2–3% of the variance in transformational leadership (DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011). This suggests that neither the FFM nor GMA are important predictors of transformational leadership. Several researchers, however, assume that EI might be an important predictor of transformational leadership.

3. Emotional intelligence

There exist many different conceptualizations of EI, but the four-branch ability model (Mayer et al., 2002; Salovey & Sluyter, 1997) is often considered to be the most promising model of EI. In the four-branch model, EI is defined as four broad mental abilities assumed to meet traditional standards of an intelligence (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 1999), i.e., ability to perceive, use, understand, and manage emotions (Mayer et al., 2002; Salovey & Sluyter, 1997).

3.1. Theoretical relationships between EI and transformational leadership

Several researchers have argued that EI as ability is important in effective leadership in general (Caruso, Mayer, & Salovey, 2002; Caruso & Salovey, 2004; George, 2000; Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005) and in transformational leadership in particular (Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000; Bass, 2002; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Brown & Moshavi, 2005). All four branches in the four-branch model seem to be important in transformational leadership.

The first branch, Perceiving Emotions, encompasses ability to e.g., identify emotions in one's physical and psychological states and in other people, express emotions accurately, and express needs related to these emotions (Salovey & Mayer, 2002). These abilities may be important in transformational leadership because it might be difficult to inspire, motivate, stimulate and show individual consideration without the ability to accurately appraise and express emotions in self and others (Kupers & Weibler, 2006; Lindebaum & Cartwright, 2010).

The second branch, Using Emotions, encompasses e.g., the ability to generate emotions to facilitate judgment and memory, and use emotional states to facilitate problem-solving and creativity (Salovey & Mayer, 2002). Ability to use emotions is assumed to be linked to inspirational motivation (Lindebaum & Cartwright, 2010), and leaders who are able to generate and use emotion may be better able to generate positive emotions that facilitate creativity, which enables them to make more compelling visions (George, 2000).

The third branch, Understanding Emotions, encompasses e.g., ability to understand relationships among various emotions, and ability to perceive the causes and consequences of emotions (Salovey & Mayer, 2002). These abilities may be important in order to generate and maintain enthusiasm (George, 2000), which is an important aspect of Inspirational Motivation. And these abilities

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