



Perception of emotion, alexithymia and creative potential[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Theoretical proposals suggest that emotional intelligence (EI) may favor creativity. In the present paper, two studies are reported with French adults to examine the degree to which the ability to identify emotion is related to creative performance. This component of ability EI was hypothesized to be positively associated with a divergent thinking task involving emotional information. Contrary to our expectations, the first study ($n = 95$) indicated that ability to identify emotions in faces and images was negatively related to idea generation ability. The second study ($n = 100$) including a measure of alexithymia confirmed this relation. Moreover, evaluating emotional creativity, we observed a significant negative link between the ability to identify emotions and the tendency to experience emotions differently from those of others. We discuss these results suggesting an opposition between consensual/convergent thinking concerning emotions (ability EI) and divergent thinking.

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1. Introduction

The impact of emotional states on creativity has been examined in a large range of studies (Zenasni & Lubart, 2008). Results from these studies diverge. Some studies show that positive emotional state favors creativity whereas others show that it inhibits it. Moreover, studies have suggested that stable emotional characteristics modulate the impact of emotional experiences on creativity. George and Zhou (2002) found that clarity-of-feelings trait is positively associated with creative performance. This result is consistent with the idea that the ability to treat emotional information favors creativity: emotional intelligence (EI) may favor clear perception of an emotional context and thus foster creative productions.

Two kinds of models of EI currently exist: trait EI and ability EI. As indicated by Petrides, Pita, and Kokkinaki (2007), “trait EI (or trait emotional self-efficacy) concerns emotion related dispositions and self-perceptions measured via self-report, whereas ability EI (or cognitive-emotional ability) concerns emotion-related cognitive abilities measured via performance-based tests” (p. 273; see also Keele & Bell, 2008).

Some theories suggest that EI may significantly favor creativity. Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey (1999) suggest that EI helps individuals to have clear thoughts which favor intuition and insight processes. Ivicevic, Brackett, and Mayer (2007) added that ability EI enables a

person to maintain or increase positive mood and thus may indirectly favor creative thinking.

Some empirical data support the hypothesis that trait EI favors creativity. For example, Wolfradt, Felfe, and Koster (2002) examined the relationship between Petrides and Furnham’s model of trait EI evaluated by the emotional intelligence scale (EIS; Schutte et al., 1998) and creative personality using the Creative Personality Scale (Gough, 1979). Their results indicate moderate to strong correlations (from $r = .36$ to $r = .55$, $p < .001$) between creative personality and four factors of trait EI (self-efficacy¹, empathy, utilization, and perceiving) evaluated by the EIS.

These studies are limited because they focus on creativity as a self-reported behaviour. Few investigations have examined the impact of trait EI on creativity using performance-based measures such as the production of creative products or divergent thinking. Guastello, Guastello, and Hanson (2004) using four test from the comprehensive Ability Battery (Hakstian & Cattell, 1976) and the “What if” task (Guastello, 1994), did not observe any significant relationships (r from .00 to .12) between trait EI (evaluated by the EIS) and divergent thinking scores. In contrast, when evaluating the creative personality with the 16 PF (Cattell, Cattell, & Cattell, 1994), they observed that the more individuals are able to treat emotions, the more they reported creative behaviours ($r = .32$, $p < .01$).

Ivicevic et al. (2007) examined relationships between ability EI, emotional creativity (EC) and creativity using performance-based measures. Ability EI was evaluated using the Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT, 2002). Scores of

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¹ In this research, Self-Efficacy with the management of emotions includes both understanding and regulating feelings in the self.

“perception of emotion”, “using emotion”, “understanding emotion”, “regulation of emotion” and a total ability EI score were calculated. Creativity was assessed using the consequences subtest of the Torrance test of creative thinking (Torrance, 1976) and the Remote Associate Test (Shames, 1994). Results showed no significant relationships between ability EI and creative performance (from $r = -.13$ to $r = .14$). Moreover, they observed weak correlations between ability EI and EC with correlations ranging from $r = .03$ to $r = .22$. Results from these studies are inconsistent. Studies involving measures of creative personality support the proposal that high ability or trait EI is associated with high creativity. However, research involving divergent thinking tasks does not support this hypothesis: correlations observed between ability EI and divergent thinking scores are weak and non-significant. Several explanations may underlie these discrepancies. First, the higher links observed between creative personality and trait EI evaluated by self-report scales may be due to shared common motivational dimensions in self-report measures. The use of cognitive creative tasks and an ability EI test allow a less biased test of the link between creativity emotional abilities. Second, variations in the emotional content of the creative tasks may contribute to observe differences; we suggest that ability EI has an impact on creative performance when the creative task includes emotional information.

In the present paper, we tested the relationship between Ability EI and creative performance in tasks including emotional content. We hypothesized that emotional abilities favor creativity involving emotional content.

2. Experiment 1

2.1. Methodology

2.1.1. Participants

Participants were 95 volunteers from the general population in France (mean age = 34.6 years, $SD = 14.8$, range = 18–73). There were 46 men and 49 women matched for age. All participants were contacted by telephone or directly and were asked whether they wish to participate in the study.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Divergent thinking

A divergent thinking task including an emotional context was used to evaluate creative potential. A fictitious situation task was used; participants had to imagine “what could be done to reduce aggressive behaviours of car drivers”. Two dependent variables were measured: (1) fluency (the number of relevant responses) and (2) mean originality. The calculation of the originality score was based on the frequency of the occurrence of ideas in the whole sample. We used the additive method proposed by Runco, Okuda, and Thurston (1987): the relative frequency of each idea in a sample is computed, so that each response can be attributed a score between $1/N$ (unique ideas in a sample of N participants) and $N/N = 1$ (representing ideas proposed by every participant in the sample of N). This score is then subtracted from 1, so that high scores correspond to rare ideas. Summing the results of this computation for each participant and dividing by the number of ideas generated yields the mean originality score. This technique has demonstrated good discriminative validity and enhances the distinction between originality and fluency scores.

2.2.2. The creative production task

Participants had to create an advertisement (image and text) to reduce the aggressive behaviours of drivers. A creativity score was

calculated based on the average score of four independent judges' evaluations of the advertisement. The four judges (three women, one man; mean age = 30.7; $SD = 6.9$), experts in the psychology of creativity², evaluated the creativity of the production using a seven-point Likert scale (1 “slightly creative”; 7 “highly creative”). Inter-judge agreement was satisfactory ($\alpha = .73$).

2.2.3. Ability EI

We measured specific cognitive abilities of EI using a French version (Zenasni, Jacquet, Lemoine, & Lubart, 2003) of the Multifactor Emotional Intelligence Scale (MEIS) developed by Mayer et al. (1999).³ Parts 1 and 3 of the MEIS' scale were used to measure the capacities to identify basic emotions. A consensus-based scoring method using the proportion methodology was employed (MacCann, Roberts, Matthews, & Zeidner, 2004). With this procedure, a response is scored as, for example, .97 points if it is selected by 97% of the participants. A high score on these scales corresponds to high abilities to identify emotions. The internal alpha reliabilities for the present sample are, respectively, .87 and .85.

2.3. Procedure

Participants completed the task individually in their home. Instructions specifying settings for task completion were provided and it was specified that they have to complete the questionnaires alone without any help in a quiet room. Participants were informed that they have to complete the questionnaires in one session, in the fixed order presented, and strictly respecting the limited time for creative tasks. They were not to share their productions with other people. First, participants completed the divergent thinking task during 8 min. Then they completed the publicity task during 15 min. Finally, they completed parts 1 and 3 from the MEIS.

3. Results

Table 1 summarizes descriptive statistics for the tasks.

Creative potential evaluated by the divergent thinking task is independent from creativity evaluated by the production task. Only fluency is weakly associated with the creative production ($r = -.22$; $p < .05$) (see Table 2).

Contrary to our hypothesis, the results indicate that the ability to identify emotions is negatively related to fluency. For both faces and image-based stimuli, results indicate that the more individuals are able to recognize emotions, the less they produce ideas ($r = -.23$ and $r = -.26$, $p < .05$ with faces and images respectively). In particular, results indicate that the more individuals are able to identify emotion in faces, the less they produce unique ideas to reduce the aggressive behaviour of drivers ($r = -.27$, $p < .05$).

Results indicate no link between identification of emotion and performance on the creative production task.

4. Discussion

Results do not support the hypothesis that the ability to identify emotions favors creativity: the production of divergent ideas is negatively associated with the identification of emotions. Analyzing previous results from Ivcevic et al. (2007), our results are consistent with negative non-significant correlations between the ability to identify emotions and a composite score of creativity⁴ ($r = -.13$ and $r = -.14$). In our study, the use of a divergent thinking

² The judges were research scientists (including authors of the present paper) or PhD students conducting scientific work on creative production.

³ Translation was made with the authorisation of the authors.

⁴ Sum of the z score of fluency and number of unique ideas.

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