



# A hierarchical integration of dispositional determinants of general health in students: The Big Five, trait Emotional Intelligence and Humour Styles

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## Abstract

Research on the psychological mechanisms underlying the link between personality and health is still premature. This study argues for an integrated multistage approach in which lower-order traits mediate the impact of higher-order traits on health. A total of 1038 university students (738 female and 300 male) completed the Big Five, trait Emotional Intelligence (EI), Humour Styles and General Health questionnaires. Structural equation modelling showed that, as hypothesized, trait EI and three of the humour styles fully mediated the paths from Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness to General Health. Moreover, the link between Neuroticism and General Health was partially mediated by trait EI and three of the humour styles. This study provides empirical evidence for an integrated multistage model that shows how multiple traits can be integrated to jointly impact on General Health.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decades a number of potential mechanisms that might link personality and health have been proposed (Smith, 2006), including mediation models in which the relation between traits and health is mediated by other variables (e.g. health behaviours). However, few studies have empirically tested these mechanisms. Smith (2006) recently noted that research on these mechanisms is largely premature and that only few studies have used formal tests of mediation.

Thus, this study sets out to argue for, and initially validate an integrated multistage approach in which lower-order, proximal traits mediate the impact of higher-order, distal traits on health. This approach is based on conceptualizations of multiple levels of influence that describe distal attributes as non-task or non-situation specific and stable over time (Hough & Schneider, 1996). Proximal variables, in contrast, are assumed to have more immediate effects, are more situationally bound and more malleable (Bandura, 1997). The assumption is that combinations of proximal and distal predictor variables are better at predicting an outcome than additive or independent contributions of multiple single predictors (Zaccaro, 2007).

The current research aims to test this approach by examining the role of trait Emotional Intelligence (trait EI; Petrides & Furnham, 2003) and humour styles (Martin, Larsen, Puhlik-Doris, Gray, & Weir, 2003) as mediators of the paths between the Big Five (e.g., Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2005) and General Health (GH, conceptualized in terms of self-perceived mental health and well-being; Goldberg & Williams, 1988). The Big Five personality dimensions (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness) were used as higher-level distal variables because they are a widely used taxonomy of personality traits that have been assumed to assess personality at the highest level of description (McCrae & Costa, 1995). The relations between the Big Five and mental health are widely researched (Enns, Cox, Sareen, & Freeman, 2001; Goodwin & Friedman, 2006; Jerram & Coleman, 1999; Kirmayer, Robbins, & Paris, 1994), and Conscientiousness (as a positive predictor) and Neuroticism (as a negative predictor) show the most consistent and strongest relations to mental health and well-being.

The rationale for including trait EI and humour styles as proximal mediator variables is that they are two lower-level dispositional factors that have been shown to be of interest in relation to health. Moreover, whilst previous research has established a robust negative relationship between trait EI and mental health problems (Dawda & Hart, 2000; Mavroveli, Petrides, Rieffe, & Bakker, 2007), Saklofske, Austin, Galloway, and Davidson (2007) recently noted that there are few studies on the relationship between trait EI and other health-related dispositional measures. Indeed, little is known about the relations between humour and trait EI and more attention should be drawn to this neglected relationship, as both constructs are salient in positive psychology (although maladaptive sides to humour and trait EI have also been acknowledged; Martin et al., 2003; Sevdalis, Petrides, & Harvey, 2007).

Trait EI is conceptualized as a personality trait located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies (Petrides, Furnham, & Mavroveli, 2007). High trait EI individuals exhibit good stress management skills and an ability to appraise, express and manage their emotions (Petrides, 2001). A number of studies have shown that trait EI is a protective factor with respect to mental health and psychological well-being, showing for instance a negative association with depression (Dawda & Hart, 2000) and psychosomatic complaints (Mavroveli et al., 2007). Further, deficits in

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