



Psychopathy and ability emotional intelligence: Widespread or limited association among facets?

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ABSTRACT

Recent research is mixed with regard to the nature of the association between facets of psychopathy and ability emotional intelligence (AEI). Some studies find evidence of widespread association between facets, whereas other studies find limited association between facets. The present research sought to provide clarification regarding this empirical discrepancy by measuring both constructs in a demographically homogenous sample of participants ($N = 144$). Analyses revealed that a number of associations between facets of psychopathy and facets of AEI were eliminated after controlling for participant gender and age. Specifically, primary psychopathy remained inversely associated with the ability to perceive emotion regardless of participant gender. Primary psychopathy and secondary psychopathy both remained inversely associated with managing emotion, but only in men. The findings demonstrate that when demographic variability is minimized non-spurious relations between psychopathy and AEI facets are relatively few in number.

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1. Introduction

Psychopathy is a construct that describes a constellation of personality traits comprising at least two higher-order facets: an interpersonal-affective facet (primary psychopathy) and a lifestyle-antisocial facet (secondary psychopathy) (Hare & Neumann, 2009; Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995; Vitacco, Neumann, & Jackson, 2005). Qualities of the interpersonal-affective facet include callous emotionality, self-grandiosity, manipulative tendencies, and impaired moral functioning. Qualities of the lifestyle-antisocial facet include engagement in behaviors that are erratic, impulsive, deviant, and hostile (but see Cooke, Michie, & Hart, 2006 for an alternative viewpoint of this facet).

The theoretical significance of the primary psychopathy facet is becoming particularly clear as researchers begin to explore the structure of psychopathy across various demographic variables such as ethnicity, age, gender, and subtype of violence. Examination of contemporary reviews suggests that the facet proves relatively consistent across these variables, whereas the structure of the secondary psychopathy facet tends to vary across ethnicity, age, and gender (cf. Salekin, 2006; Sullivan & Kosson, 2006; Verona & Vitale, 2006). This difference in structural consistency of primary

and secondary psychopathy across demographic variables in turn suggests that the associations of primary psychopathy with other psychological states and traits are likely more consistent across various demographic variables than are the associations of secondary psychopathy with other psychological states and traits. As such, it becomes important to consider the extent to which demographic variability may contribute to spurious correlation between psychopathy (particularly secondary psychopathy) and other variables of theoretical interest.

1.1. Emotional intelligence

One domain in which demographic variables may contribute to spurious correlation is work that examines the link between psychopathy and emotional intelligence (Grieve & Mahar, 2010; Malterer, Glass, & Newman, 2008; Pham, Ducro, & Luminet, 2010; Vidal, Skeem, & Camp, 2010; Visser, Bay, Cook, & Myburgh, 2010). Presently, the EI construct is conceptualized broadly in two ways. One conceptualization considers EI to be a constellation of interrelated traits that reflect emotional aspects of personality (e.g., Petrides, 2009). A second conceptualization considers EI to be a set of interrelated abilities that entail one's capacity to process and use emotional information to promote effective functioning in everyday life (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso (2008). As such, the distinction between trait emotional intelligence (TEI) and ability emotional intelligence (AEI) is now often made in the literature.

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In addition to differing in their conceptualizations of EI, the TEI and AEI perspectives also differ in their measurement of EI. TEI approaches tend to assess EI using self-report inventories in which an individual's perceptions of his or her own EI are used to determine the level of EI possessed by the individual. Whereas there are many TEI measures from which to choose (Fiori & Antonakis, 2011), the only measure of AEI presently available is the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002). The MSCEIT seeks to assess an individual's EI level by having the individual complete a series of emotion-related tasks, performance on which is then evaluated for "correctness" by how similar the individual's responses are to the typical normative responses or to the typical emotion expert responses to the tasks.

Mayer et al. (2008) argue that the MSCEIT is the only instrument that actually attempts to measure EI abilities and that most TEI measures inappropriately assess clusters of positive attributes and traits that are largely construct-irrelevant (Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Newsome, Day, & Catano, 2000). In addition, Mayer et al. (2008) argue that popular TEI measures demonstrate weak correlations with measured abilities to perceive, use, understand, and manage emotion (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006).

The MSCEIT has in turn received its own criticisms. Specifically, some have questioned whether its scoring method is psychologically valid (Petrides, 2009). Other criticisms of the measure include (a) whether it meets the criteria necessary to be considered a "true" intelligence test (Locke, 2005); (b) whether it possesses predictive ability once standard measures of general intelligence and personality are controlled for (Brody, 2004); (c) whether certain facets converge with objective measures of emotional perception (O'Sullivan and Ekman, 2004), and (d) whether its factor structure indicates a single underlying EI construct (Fiori & Antonakis, 2011). Although numerous, it is important to keep in mind that many of these latter criticisms may be applied to various TEI viewpoints and measures as well. Consequently, these criticisms may speak more to potential limitations of the EI concept more generally than to limitations of any specific EI measure.

1.2. Psychopathy and emotional intelligence

In light of the antisocial interpersonal and affective quality of psychopathy, researchers have begun to speculate that psychopathy may be linked to EI. To date, a number of studies suggest evidence of associations between facets of psychopathy and facets of TEI (Grieve & Mahar, 2010; Malterer et al., 2008; Pham et al., 2010). First, in two studies, Grieve and Mahar (2010) found evidence that secondary, but not primary, psychopathy was negatively related to a general measure of TEI. This pattern also was replicated in men, but both facets of psychopathy were negatively related to TEI in women. Looking only at male criminals, Malterer et al. (2008) found that Factor 1 (primary) psychopathy and Factor 2 (secondary) psychopathy were negatively but differentially related to facets of TEI. Like Grieve & Mahar (2010) and Malterer et al. (2008), Pham et al. (2010) found evidence of association between psychopathy and TEI facets; however, these associations were positive rather than negative. Overall, these findings are somewhat difficult to interpret for a number of reasons: (a) each set of authors used a different measure of TEI; (b) the relation between psychopathy and TEI was not always determined for both primary and secondary psychopathy facets; and (c) major demographic variables (e.g., gender, age) that might contribute to spurious correlation were not always controlled for when determining the association between psychopathy and TEI facets. Also, these findings may speak more to the relation between psychopathy and perceptions of one's own EI rather than one's actual EI, which does not prove

problematic from a TEI perspective necessarily, but does prove problematic from an AEI perspective.

Unlike work using a TEI approach, recent research adopting an AEI approach provides a clearer picture of the relation between psychopathy and EI. Visser et al. (2010) found widespread negative associations between most psychopathy and AEI facets. Austin, Farrelly, Black, and Moore (2007) found a negative association between Machiavellianism and overall AEI, although the relation was limited to only a few facets of AEI (using emotion and managing emotion). These latter data may be important to consider given the apparently high conceptual and measurement overlap between psychopathy and Machiavellianism (cf. McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998). Finally, Vidal et al. (2010) found that among male participants, primary psychopathy (total psychopathy excluding items that measure anxiety) was negatively associated with two facets of AEI (understanding and managing emotion), and secondary psychopathy (impulsive antisociality) was associated with three of four AEI facets (using, understanding, and managing emotion). Overall, these three studies suggest a negative association between psychopathy and AEI; in some instances the association is largely widespread (extends across most facets of psychopathy and AEI) and in others the association is limited to only a few facets of both constructs.

1.3. Widespread or limited association among facets?

Based on the studies that adopt an AEI approach, it is unclear whether psychopathy and AEI facets produce widespread associations with one another (as suggested by Visser et al., 2010) or whether only certain facets of the two constructs are associated with one another (as suggested by Austin et al., 2007 and Vidal et al., 2010). To an extent, this empirical disagreement may be due to whether demographic variables that tend to inversely vary with psychopathy and AEI are controlled for or not. For instance, Visser et al.'s research, which suggests widespread association among facets, included participants who possessed a fair amount of variability with regard to gender, age, ethnicity, and nationality, demographic variables linked to structural differences in secondary psychopathy but not primary psychopathy (Salekin, 2006; Sullivan & Kosson, 2006; Verona & Vitale, 2006). Vidal et al.'s (2010) work, which found limited association among facets, included participants with a fair amount of variability in age, but only included men, so participant gender could not introduce spurious correlation between psychopathy and AEI facets. Finally, Austin et al. (2007), whose sample was relatively homogeneous with regard to age and ethnicity, but who did not control for gender, also found evidence of limited association among facets (assuming one conceptualizes Machiavellianism and psychopathy as interchangeable).

In essence, the discrepancy in existing findings regarding the extent of association between facets of psychopathy and facets of AEI may result from spurious correlation produced by demographic variables that are inversely related to both constructs. Granted, demographic diversity in a sample improves the external validity of findings, but it proves potentially problematic for the internal validity of findings in the form of a selection threat when participants cannot be randomly assigned to different values of a construct.

1.4. The present research

We believe previous work provides an important contribution to an understanding of the link between psychopathy and AEI. However, we sought to clarify the nature of this link by examining associations between construct facets in a sample with relatively low ethnic variability using measures employed by Visser et al.

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