



An investigation of the relationship between trait emotional intelligence and emotional task performance

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Abstract

This study examined the relationships between trait emotional intelligence (EI) and tasks involving the recognition of facial expressions of emotion. Two facial expression recognition tasks using the inspection time (IT) paradigm assessed speed of emotional information processing. An unspeeded emotion recognition task was also included, and a symbol IT task was used to assess speed of processing of non-emotional information. It was found that scores on all three emotion-related tasks were strongly intercorrelated, as were scores on the three IT tasks. The two emotional IT scores remained significantly correlated when symbol IT performance was partialled out. This finding, together with the associations between the speeded (IT) and unspeeded face tasks suggests that the association between the emotional IT tasks is not entirely accounted for by general processing speed, and that a general emotion-processing ability also contributes to performance on these tasks. An EI subscale assessing Appraisal of Emotions was significantly correlated with performance on the emotional IT tasks, suggesting that self-reports of emotional perception ability do relate to performance measures.

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1. Introduction

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a topic of considerable current interest both amongst individual differences researchers and the general public. The EI concept provides a psychometric framework for the intuitive and appealing idea that people differ in their 'emotional skills' and that these

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differences would be expected to relate to real-life outcomes such as career and relationship success. A person's overall EI score is expected to provide a general measure of their emotional competence, whilst a number of sub-domains of EI involving the perception, control and use of emotions in the self and in others have also been characterised (see for example Bar-On, 2000; Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2000). Although EI measures have been found to associate as predicted with outcomes such as life satisfaction and social network size and quality (Ciarrochi, Chan, & Bajgar, 2001; Palmer, Donaldson, & Stough, 2002; Saklofske, Austin, & Minski, 2003), there are unresolved problems associated both with the measurement of EI and with the underlying causes of observed EI differences between individuals.

1.1. EI measurement

The most appropriate method of measuring EI is currently an area of controversy. EI is characterised by some researchers as an ability, involving the cognitive processing of emotional information, which is accordingly most appropriately measured by performance tests. An alternative proposal is that EI should be regarded as a dispositional tendency like personality which can be assessed by self-report questionnaire. A detailed discussion of EI measurement and problematic features of both approaches is given by Roberts, Zeidner, and Matthews (2001) and Matthews, Zeidner, and Roberts (2002). It is not currently clear if the two measurement methods actually assess the same construct, and in this context Petrides and Furnham (2001) have suggested the terminology 'ability EI' and 'trait EI' to distinguish the two measurement approaches. A common feature of both conceptualisations of EI is that it is considered, like psychometric intelligence, to have a hierarchical structure. Thus all EI models include a range of subcomponents covering inter- and intra-personal emotional skills such as mood regulation and emotion perception, with overall EI playing an analogous role to general ability in providing a broad measure of emotional capabilities.

The trait approach to EI measurement raises the issue of whether people can self-report on their emotional skills without actually demonstrating them in the same way as it is known they can on their personality traits, i.e. does a person's response to an item such as 'I find it easy to read people's facial expressions' bear any relation to their actual ability to read facial expressions during social interactions with others. If there is a relationship, this would lead to the expectation of an association between scores on ability and trait EI measures. Investigating the validity of trait EI by relating it to emotional task performance is an important practical issue because questionnaire EI measures are quicker to administer than task-based EI measures and require less supervision (meaning that they can be used, for example, in postal surveys) and are hence likely to be widely used.

1.2. EI mechanisms

EI is a complex construct which almost certainly operates at a number of levels ranging from biological to social. In a recent conceptualisation Matthews et al. (2002) have proposed a framework involving biological, cognitive architecture and knowledge components. At the lower (biological) level, it seems plausible to suggest that individual differences in EI could be in part underpinned by individual differences in the speed of processing of emotional information. The

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