



Emotional intelligence compensates for low IQ and boosts low emotionality individuals in a self-presentation task [☆]



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ABSTRACT

The research on emotional intelligence (EI) has focused mainly on testing the incremental validity of EI with respect to general intelligence and personality; less attention has been devoted to investigating the potential interaction effects. In a self-presentation task that required participants to obtain positive evaluations from others, individuals low in IQ but high in EI performed as well as the high IQ individuals. In addition, the low emotionality individuals performed significantly higher when also high in EI. The results extend the previous findings on the compensatory effect of EI on low IQ to the domain of interpersonal effectiveness and shed light on the effective functioning of personality traits when interpreted with the interaction of EI. Overall this study suggests that the role of EI in predicting performance might have been overlooked by checking solely for main effects and illustrates new venues for understanding the contribution of EI in explaining emotion-laden performance.

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1. Introduction

One of the most debated issues in the subject of emotional intelligence (EI) concerns the extent to which EI may predict outcomes beyond general intelligence and personality (see Fiori & Antonakis, 2011; Rossen & Kranzler, 2009). Although it is true that to be considered a valuable construct, EI needs to demonstrate incremental and discriminant validity with respect to pre-existing measures, the issue has been approached in most cases by evaluating the single contribution of EI in comparison with other individual variables as predictors of a given outcome. Much less interest and attention has been devoted to exploring the role of EI in interaction with other individual differences.

This research aims to provide a contribution to this issue by demonstrating the effect of EI on the prediction of individual performance in interaction with general intelligence and the personality trait of emotionality. These two individual differences were chosen because they are among the most important predictors of adaptation and performance (Kokko, Tolvanen, & Pulkkinen, 2013), for example, in the workplace (Huang, Ryan, Zabel, & Palmer, 2014; Salgado et al., 2003). However, general intelligence

and emotionality might provide limited contributions if not considered in conjunction with EI, which may complement their effect.

General cognitive ability, that is, the ability to solve problems and process complex information, is such a strong predictor of performance that it has been suggested to no longer discuss its relevance in the workplace (Schmidt, 2002). Yet individuals may possess complementary abilities that balance out the lack of strong cognitive abilities so that they succeed anyway. A compensatory effect of EI with respect to low cognitive ability was described in job performance as measured by the supervisor's ratings: EI became a stronger predictor as general intelligence decreased (Côté & Miners, 2006). A similar effect was found in academic performance: High trait EI was associated with better English performance in low cognitive ability students in secondary education (Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004).

The aim of the current study is to test the compensatory effect of EI in an actual performance that requires individuals to manage a rather stressful task: Individuals introduce themselves in front of a large audience (approximately 80 people), knowing that they will be evaluated on a list of interpersonal effectiveness indicators. This task was chosen because it involves a performance in an emotion-laden situation. It was hypothesized that EI would help to obtain better interpersonal effectiveness ratings in low IQ individuals but not in high IQ individuals (Hypothesis 1). In fact, high IQ individuals already possess characteristics that may ensure positive self-presentation ratings, such as the use of effective reasoning in

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the arguments of the presentation. Therefore, they were not expected to benefit to a great degree from having a high EI.

This study also investigates the interaction effect of EI with a personality characteristic that is particularly relevant in anxiety-inducing situations, i.e., neuroticism (see Matthews et al., 2006). Individuals high in neuroticism performed poorly and showed a higher heart rate in role play in which they were instructed to exhibit positive as well as negative emotions (Bono & Vey, 2007). Indeed, being anxious may interfere with performance by subtracting cognitive and emotional resources that could be used more efficiently otherwise. In addition, the fear of unexpected events may prompt avoidance responses and ruminative thoughts that have a negative effect on the task. In contrast, being able to maintain emotional control in stressful situations fosters a proactive attitude and the engagement of more effective coping strategies (Huang et al., 2014).

Ashton and Lee in the HEXACO model of personality (2007) introduced a variation of the trait neuroticism that they called emotionality, which emerged from a different rotation of the main personality traits of Agreeableness and Emotional Stability. Emotionality takes on slightly different nuances than neuroticism and describes individuals that are, beyond fearful and high in anxiety, also sentimental and dependent on others for social support. An advantage of characterizing emotionality this way is that it limits the impact of social desirability: Individuals who are high in emotionality can be described as prone to anxiety, but also sentimental – which generally has a positive connotation; similarly individuals who are low in emotionality can be described as fearless and independent, but also as cold-hearted and unemotional – denoting a negative connotation of this trait (Ashton et al., 2006).

This study investigates the effect of the combination of the trait of emotionality (high and low) with emotion-related abilities. Although being low in emotionality may be an asset in many circumstances, the current study posits that being in control of one's emotional reactions may not be enough to guarantee success when the goal is not limited to deliver a good performance but also involves interpersonal interaction.

In fact, individuals low in emotionality may appear to others as emotionally detached and rather cold; these individuals would especially benefit from emotion-related abilities because such abilities would help to convey positive emotions and commitment to the task and ultimately to be perceived as more effective in interpersonal relationships. Therefore, it was hypothesized that EI would be a boost for low emotionality individuals, so that individuals low in emotionality would achieve better interpersonal effectiveness scores when high in EI (Hypothesis 2a). As for high emotionality individuals, these individuals are characterized by being prone to anxiety and fear, and also being sentimental and dependent on others for social support (Ashton & Lee, 2008). It was hypothesized that a high EI would hinder high emotionality individuals to perform well in front of the class. In fact, being dependent on others for emotional support in a situation in which others are perceived as 'evaluators' may increase anxiety and worsen performance. Furthermore, knowing much about emotions (a characteristic that is present in individuals with a high EI), for example, knowing how emotions impact on performance, might impair highly emotional individuals who tend to ruminate about emotional events, particularly negative ones (Wupperman & Neumann, 2006). Ultimately, high emotionality individuals may increase their level of anxiety by knowing that a high level of stress hampers performance. Therefore, it was hypothesized that a high EI would hinder the performance of high emotionality individuals (Hypothesis 2b).

Within the different conceptions of EI, this research employs the definition of EI as a constellation of abilities concerning the recognition, comprehension, regulation and employment of emotions

in different circumstances (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). More specifically, the aspect of EI that was investigated is emotion understanding, i.e., the capacity to envision how emotions unfold and develop in response to certain environmental characteristics. This aspect of EI was chosen because it is a core EI ability that plays an important role in interpersonal effectiveness. Individuals who understand that showing excitement may help to be perceived as committed to the task may try to align their knowledge with their actual behavior. Similarly, individuals who know that others may feel bored in front of a monotonous speaker may try to adjust their performance in order to avoid making people annoyed. Overall, emotion understanding enables individuals to put in place effective strategies to address a challenging interpersonal task.

The study hypotheses were tested in the context of the participation in a course that was meant to prepare students to enter the job market. Students filled out personality and intelligence tests, learned about the selection process and then were invited to deliver a one minute self-presentation in front of the class (as if they were in front of a panel of recruiters) with the goal of convincing the audience to choose them as potential candidates for a job post.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

One hundred and sixteen students with a Master in Management from a Swiss University participated in the study. Their participation was voluntary in exchange for course credits. Participants were 62% female, and the mean age was 23.91 years ($SD = 1.91$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. General intelligence

Intelligence was measured with the Wonderlic Personnel Test (Wonderlic, 1992), which is a 50-item, 12 min long test composed of spatial, verbal, and numerical questions. It provides an objective measure of general cognitive ability, or *g*. The test was administered online and filled out individually. The total number of correct answers was employed in the statistical analysis. The test reliability ranges from .88 to .92 as reported in the manual (Wonderlic, 1992).

2.2.2. Emotionality

The trait of emotional stability was measured through the Emotionality scale of the personality questionnaire HEXACO short version (Ashton & Lee, 2009), which measures the basic dimensions of personality. This scale differs from the emotional stability/neuroticism scale of the traditional Big Five/FFM inspired personality questionnaire: Beyond the classical items measuring the tendency of individuals to experience fear and anxiety when dealing with life events, it also contains items that measure the tendency to be sentimental and to feel dependent on others for emotional support. Overall, individuals scoring low on emotionality may be described as those who feel little anxiety in stressful situations and who do not bother sharing concerns with others and may feel emotionally detached from others. The scale contains 10 items such as "When I suffer from a painful experience, I need someone to make me feel comfortable", "I remain unemotional even in situations where most people get very sentimental". Reliability for the Emotionality scale is reported to be .80. Raw scores were recoded as Sten scores with a mean of 5.5 and a standard deviation of 2.

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