



Relationships between Machiavellianism, emotional intelligence and theory of mind in children

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigates the associations of Machiavellianism (Mach) with trait and ability emotional intelligence (EI), and theory of mind (ToM) in 109 primary school children. Consistent with previous research with adults, negative associations were found between Mach and social and emotional understanding. Subsequent multiple regression analyses for girls showed that being more adept at emotional and social understanding does not lead them to manipulate others in social encounters. This was not the case for boys. These findings are discussed in relation to other social and individual difference variables that impact on Mach, particularly amongst boys.

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1. Introduction

Emotional intelligence (EI) is related to social relationships and actual social engagement, and leads to positive social relationships with peers and friends. However, there is also the possibility that being better at identifying and inferring emotional states leads a person to behave in a deceitful manner. Specifically, some-one high on EI may make use of their abilities to read and manage other people's emotions to manipulate their behaviours for personal gain. However, previous research with adults (Austin, Farrelly, Black, & Moore, 2007) showed there to be an inverse association between Machiavellianism (Mach) and EI. There is no research examining that association in childhood. The present study investigates this relationship in primary aged children. We also investigated the role of theory of mind (ToM) given that it has been associated with Mach type qualities, such as deception, in child samples.

1.1. Emotional intelligence and social relations

Mayer and Salovey's (1997) model of emotional intelligence (EI) outlines the construct as a cognitive ability involving four skills: the ability to perceive, use, understand and regulate emotion.

These abilities form a hierarchy, increasing in complexity from emotion perception to emotion management (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 1999). A person's overall ability EI is a measure of their overall emotional capabilities, and concerns emotion-related abilities. In contrast, EI has been conceptualised by some as a constellation of emotion-related perceptions located at the lower-levels of personality hierarchies (Petrides & Furnham, 2001). These two perspectives have been termed ability EI and trait EI, respectively. Many researchers now work within the framework of these two coexisting types of EI.

The subcomponents of ability EI contribute to optimal social functioning since the accurate and ongoing perception of others' emotions underpin adaptation to developing social and emotional situations for adults (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006) and children (Denham, 2007). In addition, managing one's own emotions effectively makes possible the expression of socially appropriate emotions and behaviour (Eisenberg, Fabes, Gauthrie, & Reiser, 2000). Overall ability EI also predicts both self and informant reports of emotional support, conflict, and positive social relations (Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004; Brackett, Warner, & Bosco, 2005; Ciarrochi, Chan, & Chaputi, 2000; Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003; Lopes et al., 2004; Mayer et al., 1999), and actual social success in naturally occurring peer encounters (Qualter, Henzi, & Barrett, 2009).

Trait EI also correlates with social functioning. It is positively associated with peer-rated pro-social behaviour amongst children (Mavroveli, Petrides, Rieffe, & Bakker, 2007), and measures of social

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adjustment in older adolescents and adults (Chapman & Hayslip, 2005; Engelberg & Sjoberg, 2004; Petrides, Sangareau, Furnham, & Frederickson, 2006; Saklofske, Austin, & Minski, 2003; Schutte et al., 2001), with those lower on EI scoring higher on loneliness, depression, and aggression than their peers.

Despite reports of the positive impact of both ability and trait EI on social relationships, it has been proposed that scoring higher on EI may be associated with higher Mach, as individuals use their ability to read the emotions of others for personal gain and manipulation (Carr, 2000; Paal & Bereczkei, 2007). 'Machiavellianism is indicative of an attitudinal personality predisposition to see people as manipulable in interpersonal situations' (Sutton & Keogh, 2000, p. 445), and it is negatively correlated with alexithymia (an inability to verbalise emotions) and empathy in adult samples (Wastell & Booth, 2003). Amongst adults, Mach has been shown to be negatively associated with ability and trait EI (Austin et al., 2007).

Given the proposed developmental changes in ability and trait EI from childhood to adolescence (Zeidner, Matthews, Roberts, & MacCann, 2003), an investigation of the relationship between Mach and EI during childhood is important. Is it the case, for example, that only once a person has achieved their full EI potential in adulthood, do they start to use these skills prosocially? In addition, empirical research suggests that during childhood, manipulating peers may be one way in which children manage relationships as they make sense of changing social roles (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Thus, we investigated whether being high on ability and/or trait EI in middle childhood enables the child to manipulate others and thus, manage changing social groups and roles. This strategy for managing relationships is characteristic of boys more than girls (Pellegrini, 2002); so, we investigate whether the direction of association between EI and Mach is different across gender.

1.2. Theory of mind and Mach

The ability to deceive others has been positively associated with ToM tasks in childhood when false belief tasks are used (Chandler, Fritz, & Hala, 1989; Russell, Mauthner, Sharpe, & Tidswell, 1991). ToM refers to the ability to impute the mental states of others, and to appreciate what another will think, feel or believe (Premack & Woodruff, 1978), and like EI, it is important for social relationships (Astington & Jenkins, 1995; Bosacki & Astington, 1999; Walker, 2005). ToM is used in the current study as an additional correlate of Mach, given not only its association with Mach type qualities such as deception in children, but also its relationship with EI (Qualter, Barlow, & Stylianou, in press). Specifically, both trait and ability EI are correlated with more advanced ToM tasks, such as faux pas tests.

Age and language are used as additional control variables as they relate to ToM development (Astington & Jenkins, 1999; Slade & Ruffman, 2005; Wimmer & Perner, 1983). Also, ability EI is placed within an intelligence framework (Mayer et al., 1999) and correlates with verbal IQ (e.g., Bastian, Burns, & Nettelbeck, 2005; Livingstone & Day, 2005).

1.3. Aims

This paper aims to explore the relationships between Mach, EI and ToM in a sample of primary school aged children. It was hypothesised that both trait and ability EI would be negatively associated with Mach, replicating the pattern found in adults. Furthermore, this study investigates the unique contribution of ToM and EI in predicting Machiavellianism, using false belief and faux pas tests of ToM. Based on previous research, we acknowledge that there may be different patterns of associations for boys and girls.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sampling frame was developed to ensure that children were chosen from a group of schools in the North West of England that were reasonably representative of schools in different areas of the UK as determined by the government Index of Multiple Deprivation. The six schools approached agreed to take part in the study by sending consent forms to parents and providing study space in the school for data collection. All children between 96 and 132 months (8 and 11 years) who attended the targeted schools were possible participants. Approximately 360 children were therefore selected, and consent forms were sent to their parents. Active parental consent was required to work with the children. Parents of 109 (65 boys, 44 girls: 10–33% from each school) returned signed consent forms. The ages of the participants ranged from 8 years 1 month to 10 years 11 months ($M = 9$ years 3 months).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Machiavellianism

The Kiddie Mach (Christie & Geis, 1970) comprises 20 statements. Children circled the response that best described the way they felt about each item using a five point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores represent higher Machiavellianism. In the current study, this scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, $\alpha = .82$.

2.2.2. ToM false belief

Passing a first order false belief task is a benchmark for understanding basic mental states. Second order false belief tasks are more difficult tasks that establish whether an individual can correctly attribute a false belief about a belief. One first order and two second order change of location stories were used, and all stories were accompanied by pictures. Both first order and second order stories were taken from Stone, Baron-Cohen, and Knight (1998). In both instances, children were awarded a pass and a score of one if they correctly answered the false belief questions. The children were also asked two control questions to assess their comprehension of the story and had to answer these questions correctly in order to receive a pass. Passes on the first order and second order tasks were summed to give an aggregate score (range = 0–3).

2.2.3. Advanced ToM tasks (faux pas)

Children were read three stories which each contained a situation in which somebody accidentally says something they should not have as it may hurt the feelings of another. These stories and scoring method were taken from Stone et al. (1998). Children were asked three questions for each story: (1) a *detection* question, 'did somebody say something they should not have?'; (2) an *understanding* question, 'who was it that said something they should not have said?'; (3) an *understanding of the mental state of listener* question, 'why should they not have said it?'; and (4) a *control* question which assessed whether they had understood the content of the story. Children had to be correct on the control question and correctly detect a faux pas had occurred in order to pass the faux pas task. Subsequently, one point was awarded for each correct answer on the detection, understanding and understanding of mental state of listener, and a total of three points was available for each. An aggregate score was calculated summing all points accrued, giving a range of scores from zero to nine. A control faux pas task was also administered to control for a 'yes' bias for the detection of a

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