



Reviving the search for social intelligence – A multitrait-multimethod study of its structure and construct validity

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Abstract

The present study conceptualized social intelligence as a performance construct and thus is based on Thorndike's idea of social intelligence as a mental ability distinct from abstract and mechanical intelligence (1920). So far, there has been only limited success in identifying a unitary social intelligence construct distinct from academic intelligence. The objects of our study were twofold. First, we intended to demonstrate the multidimensionality of social intelligence. We postulated three cognitive ability domains (i.e., social understanding, memory, and knowledge). These domains were operationalized in a multitrait-multimethod design applying verbal, pictorial, and video-based performance measures. Secondly, we intended to demonstrate that social intelligence can be differentiated from academic intelligence. One hundred eighteen high school and first year psychology students (80 of them females, mean age 19.7 years) were tested. Confirmatory factor analysis supported the postulated factor-structure within social intelligence. Correlational and regression analysis yielded generally low validity coefficients between social and academic intelligence except for the social memory tests. Still, residual analysis showed unique common variance within the social memory domain. Consequently, the study provided evidence for the structure of the social intelligence performance model according to the postulated design and demonstrated the discriminability of SI from academic intelligence.

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1. Introduction

The concept of social intelligence was introduced in the psychological literature by Thorndike (1920) even before Spearman (1927) conceptualized ‘g’. But where there is a broad consensus regarding the constitution of academic intelligence (Carroll, 1993), the search for social intelligence recommenced by Keating (1978), and continued by Ford and Tisak (1983) and Brown and Anthony (1990), still has not resolved important theoretical and measurement issues (Weis & Süß, 2005). So far, studies have shown limited success in identifying a viable domain of social intelligence. Empirical evidence for discriminant validity with measures of academic intelligence has varied according to the applied measurement procedures. Approaches relying on self-report inventories and behavioral effectiveness criteria successfully supported a distinct domain of social intelligence (Brown & Anthony, 1990; Ford & Tisak, 1983; Marlowe, 1986). Studies relying on verbal performance tasks failed to find a discriminable construct (Keating, 1978) whereas studies relying on nonverbal performance tasks showed equivocal validity evidence (Barnes & Sternberg, 1989; Probst, 1982; Riggio, Messamer, & Throckmorton, 1991). Moreover, most of these studies could not substantiate the convergent construct validity of performance measures of social intelligence with self-reported social intelligence. Most of the aforementioned approaches did not clarify the role of the intended measurement constructs, such as social insight (Chapin, 1942, 1967) or nonverbal decoding skills (Barnes & Sternberg, 1989), in a putative higher-order framework of social intelligence.

During the last decade, multitrait-multimethod designs (MTMM) were applied to studies of social intelligence to investigate its structure and construct validity (Jones & Day, 1997; Lee, Day, Meara, & Maxwell, 2002; Lee, Wong, Day, Maxwell, & Thorpe, 2000; Wong, Day, Maxwell, & Meara, 1995). The use of confirmatory factor analysis in these studies allowed the separation of trait- and method-related variance that usually confounded validity results. Wong et al. (1995, Study 2) identified social insight and social knowledge as trait-factors separable from, but positively related to, academic intelligence. Lee et al. (2000) operationalized both fluid and crystallized social and academic intelligence. Fluid and crystallized social intelligence were specified as social inference and social knowledge, respectively. Results showed that all four postulated trait-factors were discriminable from each other. Lee et al. (2002) operationalized social knowledge and the flexible application of it by using tasks with open-ended questions. Results of this study showed that the social intelligence factors were distinct from but positively correlated with (general) creativity. In summary, these MTMM-studies have provided clear evidence for the multidimensionality of social intelligence. Although the method-related variance of self- and other-report data was controlled by method-factors or correlations among the errors of the respective measures, trait-factor loadings varied between performance and self-report measures. Consequently, the influence of self-report data on the identified trait-structure within social intelligence and between social and academic intelligence has not been clarified.

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