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## The role of emotional intelligence in the maintenance of adolescent dating violence perpetration



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### ABSTRACT

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been proposed as a protective factor for dating violence perpetration (DVP) based on the findings of a few cross-sectional studies. Given the lack of previous longitudinal research, this study aimed at studying the protective role of EI components against DVP one year later considering gender effects. The sample consisted of 542 adolescents (52.2% females) with a mean age of 16.36 years ( $SD = 0.86$ ) at baseline. Participants completed measures of EI (attention, clarity, and repair) at T1 and DVP at T1 and T2. Results of the hierarchical regression analyses showed that the strongest predictor of DVP was previous level of aggression. EI moderated the maintenance of DVP over time. Specifically, those adolescents with a higher competence of clarity showed a lower perpetuation of DVP. The other two components of EI (attention and repair) displayed a gender-specific effect. In particular, a lower perpetuation of DVP was found for girls with higher scores on emotional attention, and for boys with higher scores on emotional repair. Since adolescents' EI predicts DVP, preventive interventions should address the improvement of attention, clarity, and repair of their emotions, considering EI gender specificities.

### 1. Introduction

Dating violence (DV) is a highly prevalent problem in adolescence worldwide (Wincentak, Connolly, & Card, 2017), which is associated with severe negative consequences (Chiodo et al., 2012; Choi, Weston, & Temple, 2017). It includes any act of physical, emotional, or sexual violence that can take place in person or electronically (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). Risk factor models of adolescent DV include individual emotion-related variables, such as anger management, arousability and emotionality, impulsivity, and jealousy (Jouriles, McDonald, Mueller, & Grych, 2012; Riggs & O'Leary, 1989). Emotional dysregulation and negative affectivity may be the results of adverse childhood experiences such as exposure to violence in the family (Jouriles et al., 2012; Reyes et al., 2015; Shields & Cicchetti, 1998). All these emotion-related variables are subsumed within models of trait emotional intelligence (EI), which tap self-perceptions of skill in managing emotion in self/others as well as dispositional elements (e.g., impulse control). In this way, trait EI may be a useful framework for understanding how emotion-related facets are linked to DV within risk models.

More specifically, EI refers to the competencies of being able to identify one's own feelings and those of others, regulate these feelings,

and use the information provided by feelings to motivate adaptive social behavior (Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995). EI is conceptualized as a mental ability (the information-processing approach related to traditional intelligence), but also as a personality trait (the tendency of a person to manage his/her emotions; Petrides & Furnham, 2000). Trait EI has been found to be positively associated with greater social and psychological well-being in adolescents (Mavroveli, Petrides, Rieffe, & Bakker, 2007) and negatively associated with internalizing and externalizing problems (e.g., Mavroveli et al., 2007; Siu, 2009). The systematic review of García-Sancho, Salguero, and Fernández-Berrocal (2014) on EI and aggressive behavior also provided strong evidence for a negative association between these two variables from childhood to adulthood, although none of the studies involved a longitudinal design.

Regarding youth dating relationships, EI has been found to be negatively associated with physical, psychological, and sexual dating violence perpetration (DVP) in a few cross-sectional studies (Howard, 2013; Ortiz, Shorey, & Cornelius, 2015; Shorey, Brasfield, Febres, & Stuart, 2011; Stappenbeck, Davis, Cherf, Gulati, & Kajumulo, 2016). For example, the study by Howard (2013) found a negative association between three factors of the trait EI (emotionality, self-control, and well-being) and physical and psychological DVP. Aggression may be

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used in an attempt to control negative emotions (Shorey et al., 2011). Overall, previous studies have provided some empirical evidence for the role of trait EI as a protective factor for the perpetration of DV, although longitudinal research is needed (García-Sancho et al., 2014). In addition, research on the developmental pattern of adolescent DV has identified certain variables (for example, exposure to interparental violence or delinquent behavior) that increase the maintenance of aggression (Choi & Temple, 2016; Nocentini, Menesini, & Pastorelli, 2010). Thus, the development of adaptive ways to respond to emotions might also act as a protective factor in preventing the perpetuation of aggressive behaviors.

### 1.1. Gender differences on EI and its relationship with DVP

Previous studies have found similar scores on EI among both females and males (Howard, 2013; Shorey et al., 2011), although the results vary regarding specific EI facets (Ciarrochi, Chan, & Bajgar, 2001; Shorey et al., 2011). In particular, female adolescents had higher scores on perceiving emotions and managing others' emotions, but gender differences were not found in emotional clarity or the management of their own emotions. Similar results were obtained among adults, with a higher attention to emotions in women, but a higher emotional regulation in men (Peláez-Fernández, Extremera, & Fernández-Berrocal, 2015). Furthermore, the role of trait EI in the perpetration of DV might differ depending on gender. A previous study has shown a significant and negative relationship between ability EI and behavioral problems for males but not for females (Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004). In the case of DV, Shorey et al. (2011) found greater difficulties in emotion regulation for DV perpetrators compared to non-perpetrators in both young males and females, although some gender differences emerged depending on the type of aggression and specific emotional regulation skills.

### 1.2. The current study

Although EI is considered a relatively stable individual trait, it develops throughout life and can be improved with training (Zeidner, Shani-Zinovich, Matthews, & Roberts, 2005). A few cross-sectional studies indicate that EI can be negatively associated to DVP. Only two studies, however, have explored specific EI facets; in addition, to the best of our knowledge, no previous longitudinal studies have examined the predictive role of EI on adolescent DVP and the moderating role of EI in the maintenance of adolescent aggression toward the dating partner. Therefore, the first objective of this one-year longitudinal study was to explore whether the different components of EI according to the theoretical model by Salovey et al. (1995; i.e., attention, clarity, and repair) predict less DVP (global score and physical, psychological and sexual subtypes) over time. Consistent with the theory and research reviewed above, we expected that EI would predict lower frequency of DVP one year later. The second objective was to examine whether the different components of EI have a buffering role in the maintenance of DVP. We expected that a higher EI act as a protective factor against the maintenance of DVP. Finally, considering the above-mentioned gender differences in EI, we included the participants' gender in the analyses. However, we did not make any specific hypotheses due to the mixed previous findings.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The dataset used in this study was extracted from a larger four-year project that investigates risk factors for aggression during adolescence. The sample was first stratified by school type (private vs. public). The schools were then selected randomly by means of a cluster sampling procedure. The initial sample was composed of 1256 adolescents from

21 high schools (9 public and 12 private) in Bizkaia (Spain). Of them, 809 adolescents also completed measures one year later (retention rate = 61.41%). Only adolescents who reported having had a dating relationship in the last year in at least one of the two waves of the study were selected. With this criterion, the final sample of this study was made up of 542 adolescents (52.2% girls), with a mean age of 16.36 years ( $SD = 0.86$ ) at baseline. In terms of ethnicity, 95.9% of the participants were Spanish, 3.9% were from South America, and 0.2% were from other countries. The socio-economic class of the participants was as follows: 15.4% low, 20.1% medium-low, 29.8% medium, 19.9% medium-high, and 14.8% high (Spanish Society of Epidemiology, 2000).

### 2.2. Procedure and measures

The project was approved by the Committee of Ethics in Research of the University of Deusto. First, we contacted the schools to explain the objectives of our study. Passive informed (opt-out) consent from the adolescents and their parents was required. The questionnaires were anonymous and data were confidential. To match responses over time, participants used a code that only they knew. After completing the questionnaires, adolescents received written information about centers and telephone services for adolescents in Spain in case they needed. Participants completed the questionnaires in their classrooms (in approximately 50 min) on four occasions, with each wave spaced one year apart. The measures used for the present study were taken from the last two waves (years 3 and 4). Specifically, EI was measured at the third year and DVP was measured at both the third and fourth year (Time 1 [T1] and Time 2 [T2] for this study).

The Spanish modified version of the *Trait Meta-Mood Scale* (TMMS-24; Fernández-Berrocal, Extremera, & Ramos, 2004) was used to assess the adolescents' perceived EI. The TMMS is a self-report questionnaire designed to assess relatively stable individual differences in people's tendency to attend, discriminate and regulate their moods and emotions. The Spanish modified version consists of 24 items grouped in three subscales: Attention, or the extent to what individuals tend to observe and think about their feelings and moods (8 items; e.g., "I pay a lot of attention to how I feel"); Clarity, or the understanding of one's emotional states (8 items; e.g., "I am usually very clear about my feelings"); and Repair, or the individuals' beliefs about ability to regulate their feelings (8 items; e.g., "Although I am sometimes sad, I have a mostly optimistic outlook"). The response choices for each item were defined according to a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (*it does not describe me well*) to 4 (*it describes me very well*). The TMMS-24 has shown appropriate reliability and significant relations with criterion variables (depression, life satisfaction, and ruminations; Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2004). Cronbach's alphas in this study were .90, .90 and .88 for the subscales of attention, clarity, and repair, respectively.

The *Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory* (CADRI, Wolfe et al., 2001) was used to detect the existence of aggressive acts in adolescent dating relationships over the last year. The CADRI consists of 25 bidirectional items (perpetrator/victim) that assess five different forms of abusive behavior that may occur between adolescent dating partners: Physical Abuse (e.g., "to slap or pull the hair"), Threatening Behavior (e.g., "to threaten to hurt"), Sexual Abuse (e.g., "to force to have sex when the other didn't want to"), Relational Abuse (e.g., "to try to turn friends against"), and Verbal/Emotional abuse (e.g., "to insult with put-downs"). The response choices for each item were defined with a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*often*). Participants were asked to answer the questionnaire only if they had had a dating partner in the last year. The Spanish version of the CADRI has shown adequate psychometric properties and confirmation of its factor structure in a sample of Spanish high school students (Fernández-Fuertes, Fuertes, & Pulido, 2006). In this study, Cronbach's alphas for perpetration were .77 at T1 and .84 at T2, and for victimization they were .83 at T1 and .87 at T2.

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