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Emotional intelligence, affect intensity, and social adjustment [☆]

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Abstract

The present paper deals with the concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI) (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) for the main purpose of investigating the claim that it involves emotion perception. Emotion perception was operationalized as accuracy in the judgment of others' acute and habitual feeling states. An accurate perception of others' emotions should be related to, on the one hand, heightened reactivity to environmental stimuli and, on the other hand, social adjustment. EI, as measured by both performance and self-report measures, was therefore investigated in relation to these concepts. The analysis was based on 282 respondents and showed that emotion perception was related to a greater accuracy in the assessment of mood as experienced by others. Results further suggest that EI may be construed, in part, as including emotional reactivity. Another finding was that successful social adjustment was related to a more accurate perception of variations in others' mood, which strengthens the hypothesis that emotion perception is essential for adaptation on a social level.

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1. Introduction

The concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI), introduced by Salovey and Mayer (1990), has emerged along with a new emphasis on the inter-personal characteristics of emotion (e.g., Campos, Campos, & Barrett, 1989; Ekman, 1992; Frijda & Mesquita, 1994). According to a social-functional view, emotions signal socially relevant information that is of potential use for understanding how to engage successfully in interactions with others (Keltner & Kring, 1998).

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Since EI is defined as the ability to identify, process and manage emotions of one's own and in others (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2000), this ability should be involved in the processes underlying the perception of emotional signals and the adaptation to different situations of an emotional and social nature. The present paper deals with EI and has the main purpose of investigating the claim that it involves emotion perception. Other aims of the present study were to examine EI in relation to, on the one hand, heightened reactivity to emotional stimuli and, on the other hand, social adjustment. Emotion perception should be related to both reactivity and social adjustment.

We posit that the ability to accurately perceive information of an emotional character should be related to a heightened reactivity to environmental stimuli, although the definition of EI by Mayer et al. (2000) does not include such an aspect. Their definition nonetheless implies a disposition of this kind in the postulation that EI involves registering and attending to emotional cues in order to extract information inherent to such stimuli. We therefore tested the hypothesis that EI is related to a disposition to experience more intense affect in response to emotional stimuli and employed, for this purpose, the Affect Intensity Measure (AIM: Larsen, Diener, & Emmons, 1986).

The ability to accurately read others' emotions should further contribute toward potential opportunities for interaction and the maintenance of social relationships. In our previous studies, we have found that people high in EI reported experiencing less loneliness (Sjöberg & Engelberg, submitted for publication) and a better balance between work and family/leisure (Sjöberg, 2001a). Prior studies thus lead us to the expectation that an accurate perception of others' emotional states is related to a greater degree of social adjustment. The kind of emotional competence associated with EI should hence have implications for the ability to attain a richer and more varied social life.

In order to test the claim that high EI entails a more accurate ability to read others' emotions, various types of data were collected. Mood measures were obtained to assess the rapport with the mood of fellow participants in a concurrent situation. A measure of the accuracy of emotion perception was obtained by examining how accurate assessments of others' feelings were in relation to actual ratings of those being judged. This is a measure of performance with regard to emotion perception.

In their studies, Mayer and Salovey made use of performance measures derived from the judgment of emotions experienced by people as described in short narratives or as shown in photographs. These kinds of judgments are assessed according to the principle of consensus scoring which means that ratings are assessed in reference to the most common answer in the sample as a whole.

In the present study, we utilized the same kind of performance measure as originally developed by Salovey and Mayer. Respondents were presented with the task to judge the extent to which each of the characters in descriptions of social problem episodes experienced different emotions. Thus, the performance task was a measure of emotion knowledge, or the ability to judge emotions on the basis of beliefs about reactions that are likely to be elicited under given circumstances. This type of performance samples knowledge about generally held beliefs, in one's culture, about emotional reactions in social problem episodes.

Another common approach to measure EI draws heavily on self-report instruments assessing personality variables and dispositions (e.g., Bar-On, 2000; Goleman, 1995; Petrides & Furnham, 2001; Schutte et al., 1998). One such instrument is the scale designed by Schutte et al. (1998) which

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