



Trait emotional intelligence and social deviance in males and females



Alison M. Bacon*, Lindsay Lenton-Maughan, Jon May

School of Psychology, University of Plymouth, UK

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ABSTRACT

High trait Emotional Intelligence (trait EI) is often considered a positive attribute, but some studies have suggested that it may facilitate deception or manipulative relational behaviours, and that the effects differ according to gender. In two studies, we examine the influence of trait EI factors on social deviance, from adolescence through to adulthood. A total of 455 participants (243 females) completed the Trait EI Questionnaire and provided self-reports of deviant behaviours during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Study 1) or in adulthood (Study 2). For males, adolescent and emerging adult deviance related negatively to Emotionality and Self-control, in accordance with positive views of trait EI, but in adulthood deviance was predicted only by high Sociability. For females, the opposite pattern was seen, with high levels of Emotionality and Sociability associated with deviance in adolescence and high Sociability in emerging adulthood. Adult female social deviance was negatively correlated with Self-control and Emotionality, replicating the adolescent male profile. Trait EI is not inevitably positive, and is an under-researched personality determinant of social deviance. Further consideration of the developmental trajectory of trait EI may provide insights to inform intervention with at-risk individuals in adolescence, and beyond.

Trait Emotional Intelligence (trait EI) defines a constellation of affective dispositions and self-perceptions which together reflect the ability to identify, attend to, experience, understand and utilise emotions (Petrides, 2009; Petrides & Furnham, 2003; Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). Trait EI integrates affective aspects of personality in terms of four factors: Wellbeing (high scorers feel, content, confident and fulfilled), Sociability (high scorers feel agentic in social contexts and have good interpersonal skills); Self-control (high scorers are good at controlling urges and desires, regulating external pressures and handling stress) and Emotionality (high scorers understand their own and others' feelings and can use this ability in sustaining relationships with others; Petrides et al., 2007; Petrides, 2009; Petrides et al., 2016). Although correlated with other higher-order personality dimensions trait EI is distinct in personality factor space, showing clear incremental validity over models of personality such as the Big Five and Giant Three (e.g. Pérez-González & Sanchez-Ruiz, 2014; Petrides et al., 2007). Higher levels of trait EI are generally considered adaptive and are found to predict superior workplace performance (O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2011; Wong & Law, 2002), mental and physical health (Austin, Saklofske, & Egan, 2005; Schutte, Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2007), social relationships (Mavroveli, Petrides, Rieffe, & Bakker, 2007), educational achievement and fewer unauthorized absences and school exclusions (Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004).

In defining the construct, it is important to note the distinction between trait EI, as assessed by self-report, and ability EI which is measured by maximum performance tests in a similar way to intelligence (Petrides et al., 2007). While both emphasise managing and understanding emotions, the conceptual differences between the two are reflected in empirical data which has shown very low correlations between measures of the two constructs (O'Connor & Little, 2003; Warwick & Nettelbeck, 2004). A review by Zeidner, Matthews, and Roberts (2012) has indicated that self-report measures of EI appear to be more robustly related to health and well-being criteria than are ability-based measures and the present studies are concerned with this trait EI approach.

In the present studies, we are interested in the relationship between individual differences in trait EI and socially deviant behaviour. For this purpose, we define social deviance in terms of the description of anti-social behaviour offered by Rutter (2003) who suggested that it be characterized as nonconformity, disregard or unwillingness to adhere to rules and obligations imposed by society or social organizations. As such, it may include criminal acts which violate specific laws, but also behaviours which are not in themselves illegal but which contradict the social norms of the culture in which the individual resides, for instance, cheating in exams bullying and name-calling can be classed as anti-social by this definition. As such, occurrence of deviant behaviour is not the sole preserve of forensic samples and can be measured within a

* Corresponding author at: School of Psychology, Plymouth University, Drake Circus, Plymouth PL4 8AA, UK.
E-mail address: ambacon@plymouth.ac.uk (A.M. Bacon).

general population. It is notable that thrust of antisocial behaviour legislation in the UK over the last two decades has been aimed at deviant, non-criminal behaviours. For instance, the Antisocial Behaviour Order and subsequent Antisocial Behaviour Injunction legislation was designed to address activities such as drunken or threatening behaviour, vandalism, graffiti or playing loud music at night using civil orders rather than criminal sanctions (Home Office, 2014). Socially deviant behaviours have been associated with low scores on measures of a number of emotional personality factors including emotional and behavioural self-regulation (Downey, Johnston, Hansen, Birney, & Stough, 2010; Eisenberg et al., 1996; Moffitt, Arseneault, Belsky, et al., 2011), empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2007; Marshall & Marshall, 2011; Milojević & Dimitrijević, 2014) as well as poor mentalisation (Fonagy et al., 1997) impulsivity and sensation seeking (Gomà-i-Freixanet, 1995; Romero, Luengo, & Sobral, 2001). Unsurprisingly therefore, low trait EI is also claimed to be a risk factor for various maladaptive behaviours, including those considered deviant or antisocial (Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2009), including bullying (Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2012) and aggressive behaviour in adolescents (Gugliandolo, Costa, Cuzzocrea, & Larcana, 2015).

Furthermore, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting a darker side to trait EI and several studies have suggested that it may be used as a tool for deception or manipulative relational behaviours and that the effects differ according to gender. Grieve and Panebianco (2013) reported that male participants with higher levels of trait EI, social information processing, indirect aggression, and self-serving cognitive distortions were more likely to exploit others. Jones and Paulhus (2011) suggested that good interpersonal skills are necessary in order to successfully manipulate others: without understanding others' emotions and being able to influence them, manipulative individuals would simply not be able to achieve their goals. As well as such interpersonal talents facilitating the manipulation of others, an added advantage is the ability to behave in such a socially skilled manner that the aggressor can appear innocent of any wrongdoing or harmful intention (Björkqvist, 1994). Hence the desired goal is attained without attribution of blame, and therefore at no cost to the perpetrator.

In one of the few studies to consider gender-differences in the relationship between socially deviant behaviours and trait EI, Bacon, Burak, and Rann (2014) collected self-reports of adolescent delinquency in a young student population aged 18–25. They found that male participants with higher global trait EI scores reported lower levels of delinquency, however, high trait EI females reported higher levels of delinquency. These results were interpreted as reflecting the protective influence of self-regulation (emotional and behavioural) and low impulsivity in males, while for females, Bacon et al. (2014) postulated that an understanding of others peoples' emotions facilitates emotionally manipulative behaviours and relational aggression. Such deviant, but not criminal, behaviours are known to be prevalent among adolescent females, as opposed to males where physically aggressive behaviour is more common (Archer, 2004; Björkqvist, 1994; Österman et al., 1998; Viding, Simmonds, Petrides, & Frederickson, 2009). Most recently, Bacon and Regan (2016) showed that high trait EI females who report deviant behaviours also score highly on aspects of emotional manipulation, assessed with the Manipulating the Emotions of Others Scale (Austin & O'Donnell, 2013) and also on Machiavellianism, a personality trait typified by deceptive and manipulative social behaviours (Christie & Geis, 1970).

However, a major limitation of this work is that it focusses only on global trait EI scores. As trait EI is a multidimensional construct, analysis at its global level cannot fully encapsulate potential variation in emotional perceptions and may mask differential relationships between the trait EI facets and other criteria of interest (Petrides et al., 2016). For instance, Zeidner et al. (2012) review research which has suggested that it is the emotional understanding and regulation aspects of EI specifically that protect against addiction, a key factor in many acts of deviance. A recent study (Milojević, Dimitrijević, Marjanović, & Dimitrijević, 2016)

compared trait EI scores in a sample of convicted juvenile delinquents and a non-forensic sample. They found that the delinquents showed lower scores on the Emotionality, Well-being and Self-control trait EI factors. Research using ability EI measures have found similar results (Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004; Hayes & Reilly, 2013). These results explicate Bacon et al.'s (2014) findings for males but do not consider female antisocial behaviour.

Our Study 1 addresses these issues in a replication of Bacon et al. (2014) where we examine retrospective reports of adolescent deviant behaviour (between ages 12 and 18) but using a full-scale trait EI measure that allowed for the examination of scores on the four subfactors, rather than simply the global score. The first aim of Study 1 therefore was to test Bacon et al.'s (2014) proposal that a positive relationship between trait EI and adolescent deviance in young females reflects a malignant and self-serving utilisation of emotional understanding and, conversely, that the suggested protective effect of high trait EI in young males reflects low impulsivity and high self-regulation. In terms of the four sub-factors of trait EI, if Bacon et al.'s thesis is correct we should observe a negative association between levels of deviant behaviour and Self-control in males and positive association between levels of deviant behaviour and both Emotionality and Sociability in females. However, it is possible that trait EI factors might be differentially implicated in deviant behaviours of different kinds, for instance skiving school compared to a violent assault. As such we developed the methodology in a further way in order to test this possibility, categorising the behaviours into two types according to whether they reflect criminal conduct (behaviours generally associated with juvenile delinquency or criminality, such as vandalism, theft and arson) and behaviours reflecting more mainstream deviance such as exam cheating or verbal bullying.

Furthermore, we extended the line of enquiry by also obtaining reports of more current deviance in emerging adulthood, ages 18–25. Arnett (2000) argues that this stage is distinct from both adolescence and adulthood and is distinguished by relative independence from social roles and normative expectations. Individuals in this stage are no longer fully dependent on their families or carers but have not yet entered into the full responsibilities of adulthood. As such, this lifestage is often typified by exploration of different potential life directions in personal, professional and worldview domains. The few studies which have considered crime/social deviance in this specific lifestage have tended to focus on social and life circumstances (e.g. Piquero, Brame, Mazerolle, & Haapanen, 2002) rather than personality traits. As such, the second aim of Study 1 was to examine whether the trait EI profiles observed for socially deviant adolescents remain stable into emerging adulthood.

Study 2 examined the trait EI profile of socially deviant adults. Firstly, we expected that both types of deviant behaviour would be reported at lower levels than in Study 1 as most individuals desist with age. Secondly, we expected that individuals reporting higher levels of deviance would continue to show poor Self-control (males) and Emotionality (females) in terms of trait EI scores. Going beyond Bacon et al.'s (2014) findings, in Study 2 we expand the research into an older non-student population in order to examine trait EI profiles in those committing deviant acts as adults. While for most adolescents, some form of antisocial or deviant behaviour is part of a relatively benign and short-lived episode in the transition to adulthood, Moffitt (e.g. 1993; 2006) has identified a group she terms life-course persistent offenders in whom antisocial behaviour and crime persists into adulthood. Although Moffitt's account proposes that many of the main determinants of life-course offending are social, she also suggests that such offenders may fail to develop the prosocial and self-regulatory cognitions which contribute to desistance in late adolescence for most individuals. An alternative account, the antisocial propensity theory (Lahey & Waldman, 2003) argues for a general lifetime developmental trajectory within which three dispositional dimensions in particular (prosociality, daring and negative emotionality) may predispose to offending. Overall, whether or not adolescents can be considered a separate category of offender from those

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