Sex-linked personality traits and stress: Emotional skills protect feminine women from stress but not feminine men

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ABSTRACT

In the current study, we sought to determine whether sex-linked dimensions of trait emotional intelligence (interpersonal vs intrapersonal dimensions) could account for the protective effects of sex-linked traits (masculinity, femininity) on stress. We also sought to determine whether the efficacy of characteristically masculine and feminine emotional competencies in the context of stress, might depend on whether someone is male or female. Participants were 206 white-collar workers who completed a range of questionnaires measuring masculinity, femininity, trait emotional intelligence and ongoing stress. Results demonstrated that across both men and women, masculinity and femininity protect from stress via wellbeing (a non-sex linked component of trait emotional intelligence). Results also demonstrated that, again for both men and women, masculinity protects from stress via self-control (a masculine dimension of trait emotional intelligence). More interestingly, results demonstrated that for women only, femininity protects from stress via the feminine dimension of trait emotional intelligence (emotionality). Emotionality was not found to be beneficial for feminine men in the context of stress. Results are explained in terms of established gender differences in emotional processing.

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1. Introduction

A number of studies have demonstrated that sex-linked personality traits (i.e. traits correlated with biological sex, such as masculinity/femininity and agency/communion) predict individual differences in ongoing psychological stress and/or mental health functioning (e.g. Helgeson, 1994; Vesely, Siegling, & Saklofske, 2013). In particular masculinity, which is characterised by the male gender roles of dominance and assertiveness (Berger & Krahé, 2013; Helgeson, 1994), is associated with positive mental health functioning, low levels of stress, and low internalising mental health difficulties (Lubinski, Tellegen, & Butcher, 1981; Vesely et al., 2013). Whereas femininity, which is characterised by the female gender roles of warmth and sensitivity, is positively associated with some indices of adaptive mental health functioning (e.g. adjustment, Whitley, 1985), but not directly associated with stress or internalising mental health difficulties (Vesely et al., 2013; Whitley, 1985). Although females are known to experience more stress on average than males, this difference is generally attributed to lower levels of masculinity in females, rather than higher levels of femininity (Helgeson, 1994; Vesely et al., 2013; Whitley, 1985).

Although much research indicates that sex-linked traits are related to ongoing stress and mental health functioning, only limited research has sought to explore why such relationships exist. Recently, Vesely et al. (2013) conducted a study to determine whether emotion-related aspects of sex-linked personality traits could account for the relationship between sex-linked personality traits and stress-related constructs. Specifically, they hypothesised that global trait emotional intelligence (trait EI), which is thought to capture the emotion-related aspects of personality, would mediate the relationships between sex-linked personality traits and internalising mental health difficulties. Consistent with their hypotheses, Vesely et al. (2013) found that trait EI mediated both masculinity (termed "agency") and femininity (termed "communion") in the prediction of internalising mental health difficulties. They concluded that the emotional aspects underpinning masculinity and femininity act as protective mechanisms against internalising mental health difficulties. Although not specifically tested, the authors suggested that masculinity might operate via intrapersonal trait EI dimensions (self-control and sociability), while femininity might operate via the interpersonal dimension (emotionality). They also suggested that sex differences in the utilisation of trait EI dimensions might contribute to the observed sex differences in internalising mental health difficulties.

The purpose of the current study was twofold. First we sought to replicate and extend the research by Vesely et al. (2013) by showing that different dimensions of trait EI mediate the relationship between different sex-linked traits and stress. Specifically we tested whether masculinity operates to reduce stress via intrapersonal dimensions of trait EI, and also whether femininity operates to reduce stress via

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interpersonal dimensions of trait EI. We therefore extend the research by Vesely et al. (2013) by exploring the effects of trait EI at the dimension level, rather than the global level. We also focus specifically on stress in this study, rather than the broader measure of mental health difficulties as used by Vesely et al. (2013).

Second, we further investigate the relationships between sex, sex-linked traits and stress by testing the possibility that there might be sex differences in the efficacy of intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of trait EI in the context of stress. In other words, we assess whether the protective functions of trait EI operate in the same way for males and females. Indeed, as outlined in detail later, it is plausible that characteristic feminine dimensions of trait EI (interpersonal dimensions) are more effective at reducing stress in females than males. Similarly, it is plausible that characteristic masculine dimensions of trait EI (intrapersonal dimensions) operate to more effectively protect males from stress than females.

1.1. Sex-linked personality, trait EI and stress

Trait EI can be defined as self-perceptions of emotional ability and adaptive emotional dispositions (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). It is distinct from the similarly termed but conceptually distinct ability EI, in that it is regarded as a set of emotion-related personality variables and consequently measured using self-report questionnaires as opposed to tests of maximal ability (see Petrides et al., 2007). Individuals high in trait EI tend to be optimistic, flexible and have high levels of intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies (Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Trait EI has been found to be particularly useful in predicting psychological stress, with many studies finding that individuals high in trait EI experience less stress across a variety of contexts (Mikolajczak, Menil, & Luminet, 2007; Saklofske, Austin, Mastoras, Beaton, & Osborne, 2012). Trait EI also has meaningful associations with biological sex and sex-linked personality. At the trait EI dimension level, males score significantly higher in self-control and sociability dimensions (intrapersonal elements), whereas females score significantly higher on the emotionality dimension (interpersonal element; McIntyre, 2010; Petrides, 2009a; Siegling, Furnham, & Petrides, 2015). Regarding sex-linked personality, research has shown that both masculinity and femininity are positively associated with trait EI; however, masculinity has the larger association (Siegling, Saklofske, Vesely, & Nordstokke, 2012).

Consistent with what Vesely et al. (2013) suggested then, it makes theoretical sense that the relationship between sex-linked personality traits and stress can be accounted for by dimensions of emotional intelligence that are also known to be sex-linked. Feminine dimensions of trait EI (interpersonal dimensions) should mediate femininity in the prediction of stress, and masculine dimensions of trait EI (intrapersonal dimensions) should mediate masculinity. We therefore hypothesise the following:

H1a. Masculinity will have a negative indirect effect on stress via the intrapersonal factors of trait EI (self-control and sociability). Both self-control and sociability will be significant mediators in this relationship.

H1b. Femininity will have a negative indirect effect on stress via the interpersonal factor of trait EI (emotionality). Emotionality will be a significant mediator in this relationship.

1.2. Possible sex differences in the efficacy of trait EI factors

The second objective of the current study was to assess whether the protective functions of trait EI operate in the same way for males and females. In other words, we seek to determine whether having positive feminine attributes is equally as adaptive for men as it is for women, and whether having positive masculine attributes is equally as adaptive for women as it is for men (in the context of stress). Indeed such effects

are plausible because biological differences between males and females might mean that males are biologically predisposed to benefit more from typically masculine strategies, whereas females are biologically predisposed to benefit more from typically feminine strategies. Consistent with this possibility, there are well-established differences between males and females in terms of brain activity underlying emotional competencies (Kret & de Gelder, 2012). For example, Jaušovec and Jaušovec (2005) found that resting brain activity is positively associated with interpersonal emotional abilities in women, but negatively associated with such abilities in men. Conversely they found that resting brain activity was positively associated with strategic emotional abilities in men but not women. It is possible, therefore, that fundamental differences in how males and females perceive and process emotional information will have implications for the potential benefits of characteristic masculine and feminine emotional attributes in males and females.

Consistent with this reasoning, some empirical research has revealed sex differences in the efficacy of emotional competencies in different situations. For example ability-based emotional intelligence has been found to predict high social competence in men but not women (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006) and low depression in men but not women (Salguero, Extremera, & Fernández-Berrocal, 2012). Additionally, global trait EI has been found to play a greater protective role for men than women in the context of work stress (Petrides & Furnham, 2006). This latter finding in particular is consistent with what we propose, because global trait EI is comprised primarily intrapersonal (masculine) rather than interpersonal (feminine) emotional competencies with males tending to score higher than females (Petrides, 2009a). We therefore hypothesise two moderated mediated effects, whereby the emotion-related components of masculinity and femininity (operationalised using trait EI) will be differentially related to stress, based on whether someone is male or female as follows:

H2a. The negative indirect effect from masculinity to stress via the intrapersonal factors of trait EI (self-control and sociability) will be stronger for men than women.

H2b. The negative indirect effect from femininity to stress via the interpersonal factor of trait EI (emotionality) will be stronger for women than men.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 206 adult residents of the United States (18 years or older), currently employed in professional or administrative roles (i.e. white collar roles), including (but not limited to) accountants, managers, bankers, administrative assistants, human resources officers, IT staff, marketers, receptionists, social workers, teachers and web designers. The sample was evenly distributed across sex (104 females, 102 males) with a mean age of 33.6 (SD = 9.99). Participants were recruited from the online crowdsourcing website Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk samples have been widely used in academic research, and generally return internal consistencies equivalent to traditional samples, and provide excellent quality sampling in terms of demographic diversity, particularly when compared to university samples (see Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). To participate, MTurk members were required to "accept" the offer of participation, navigate to an external website and complete the online, self-administered questionnaire at their own pace. On completion participants were awarded $4.50 (USD).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Biological sex
Biological sex was measured as a categorical self-report variable.