The intervening role of Agreeableness in the relationship between Trait Emotional Intelligence and Machiavellianism: Reassessing the potential dark side of EI

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ABSTRACT

Previous research into the potential 'dark' side of trait emotional intelligence (EI) has repeatedly demonstrated that trait EI is negatively associated with Machiavellianism. In this study, we reassess the potential dark side of trait EI, by testing whether Agreeableness mediates and/or moderates the relationship between trait EI and Machiavellianism. Hypothesized mediation and moderation effects were tested using a large sample of 884 workers who completed several self-report questionnaires. Results provide support for both hypotheses; Agreeableness was found to mediate and moderate the relationship between trait EI and Machiavellianism. Overall, results indicate that individuals high in trait EI tend to have low levels of Machiavellianism *because* they generally have a positive nature (i.e. are agreeable) and *not* because they are emotionally competent per se. Results also indicate that individuals high in 'perceived emotional competence' have the potential to be high in Machiavellianism, particularly when they are low in Agreeableness.

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1. Introduction

Trait Emotional Intelligence (trait EI) is best defined as a constellation of emotional self-perceptions "located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies" (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007, p. 287). It is generally considered a positive, adaptive trait and has been found to correlate with several positive outcomes including mental health (Martins, Ramalho, & Morin, 2010; Sinclair & Feigenbaum, 2012), physical health (Martins et al., 2010), cooperative behavior and marital satisfaction (Schutte et al., 2001). However despite the generally positive nature of trait EI, some have suggested a potential negative or 'dark' side to this trait (e.g., Austin, Farrelly, Black, & Moore, 2007; Carr, 2000). Indeed it follows that those with self-perceived capabilities to recognize and influence the emotions of others (i.e. those high in trait EI) might have a *disposition to use such capabilities for self-gain* (Austin et al., 2007). From this perspective, it is plausible that trait EI might predict 'Machiavellianism' (Mach), which is a personality trait characterized by the tendency to engage in exploitative, self serving and emotionally manipulative behavior (Christie & Geis, 1970).

However research has repeatedly demonstrated that trait EI is negatively correlated with Mach (e.g., Austin et al., 2007; Barlow, Qualter, & Stylianou, 2010). Such research indicates that trait EI negatively predicts Mach in children (Barlow et al., 2010) as well as in adults (Austin et al., 2007). Interestingly, Austin et al. (2007) replicated this finding with ability EI, and found that for both trait and ability measures of EI, subscales relating to 'managing others' emotions' were the strongest negative predictors of Mach. Furthermore, research focussing on Mach and 'empathy' (a component of trait EI) has also revealed similar negative associations between these constructs (e.g., Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013). Clearly therefore, a negative 'total' relationship exists between trait EI and Mach, such that individuals high in trait EI tend to be low in Mach.

We argue however that such a relationship is not sufficient to dismiss the potential dark side of trait EI, and that two key questions remain unanswered regarding the relationship between trait EI and Mach. First, as noted above, those high in trait EI seemingly have the potential to use their emotional capabilities in exploitative, self serving and manipulative (i.e. Machiavellian) ways. Our first key question then, is *why* do such individuals tend to forego this potential and actually score low on measures of Mach? Second, it is possible that the overall negative relationship between trait EI and Mach does not hold true for individuals with a disposition towards selfish, competitive and uncooperative behavior to begin

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with. Specifically, it seems likely that such individuals might be particularly likely to engage in emotionally manipulative, exploitative behaviors, when they are *also high in trait EI*. Our second key question then, is *under what conditions* might there be a positive relationship between trait EI and Mach? Overall therefore, we seek to better understand the potential dark side of trait EI by first examining *why* high trait EI tends to result in low rather than high Mach, and second, by testing *when* high trait EI might actually result in darker (i.e. Machiavellian) behavior.

1.1. The multidimensional nature of Trait EI and Mach

Trait EI is generally considered to be a broad, multidimensional construct. It is comprised of several sub-dimensions related to *perceived emotional competence* (e.g. perceived emotional regulation, perceived interpersonal skills) and *positive emotional functioning* (e.g. stress management, optimism, happiness). A further core feature of trait EI, is its inherent positive, pro social nature, which stems from the inherently pro-social nature of most trait EI sub dimensions (particularly those related to interpersonal skills; see for example Bar-On, 2002). Therefore, 'total' scores on trait EI measures tend to reflect a range of self-reported emotional competencies and positive emotional dispositions that are generally accompanied by the pro social desire to bring about positive outcomes for others.

Given this multidimensional nature of trait EI, it is possible that the negative relationship between trait EI and Mach is primarily due to the pro-social and positive component of trait EI. In other words, it is possible that those high in trait EI are generally low in Mach, because people high in psychometrically measured trait EI are essentially 'nice, friendly and good' people. We believe this particularly holds true for the trait EI sub dimension 'Managing Others' Emotions' (MOE) as this is arguably the most pro-social of all trait EI sub dimensions. It is also the sub dimension that has the strongest negative association with Mach (Austin et al., 2007). Importantly, therefore, we suggest that the negative association between trait EI and Mach has little to do with *perceived emotional competence* (*or perceived 'emotional cleverness'*). On the contrary, we suggest that this component of trait EI might actually be positively associated with Mach under certain conditions.

Consistent with this possibility, some research indicates that high Machs are actually *more emotionally competent* (based on non-EI self-report and objective measures) than their non-Mach counterparts. For example, Austin et al. (2007) found that Machs out-score non-Machs in their perceived ability to manipulate the emotions of others (example item "I can use my emotional skills to make others feel guilty"). Similarly, Bagozzi et al. (in press) found that individuals with high levels of Mach demonstrated enhanced empathic processing of faces (based on higher activation of the insula and pars opercularis brain regions) than individuals with low levels of Mach. Therefore it is possible that when elements of trait EI specifically relating to emotional competence are isolated, trait EI might (under certain conditions) positively predict darker dispositions, such as Mach.

1.2. Current research

In this study we focus on the relationship between total trait EI and Mach, as well as the relationship between the trait EI subscale Managing Others' Emotions (MOE) and Mach. MOE can broadly be defined as a perceived set of abilities related to perceiving and managing emotions in others, generally with the view towards improving the emotions of others. We focus specifically on this subscale, as previous research has found strong negative relationships between MOE and Mach (using both trait and ability measures; Austin et al., 2007). Total trait EI and MOE were measured

using Schutte et al.'s (1998) questionnaire. This widely used measure of trait EI was appealing for this research since it has a specific subscale that has been termed 'Managing Others' Emotions' (see Ciarrochi, Chan, & Bajgar, 2001) and clearly measures the various dimensions of trait EI as discussed above (i.e. perceived emotional competence, positive emotional functioning, general pro-social nature). Based on the research discussed above, and the generally pro-social, altruistic element to trait EI, we hypothesize that trait EI and MOE will be negatively correlated with Mach (H1).

Second and more importantly, we wanted to investigate the potential mediating and moderating roles of the Big Five trait 'Agreeableness' in the relationship between trait EI and Mach. Agreeableness is a broad personality trait, characterized by cooperativeness, soft-heartedness, tolerance and altruism (Barrick & Mount, 2006; Goldberg, 1999). In the mediation analysis, we test the idea that the relationship between trait EI and Mach can be explained by Agreeableness. In other words, we test the possibility that those high in trait EI are unlikely to engage in Mach behaviors *because* they are high in Agreeableness (i.e. because they are nice, friendly, good people) and not because they perceive themselves capable of competently managing/using emotions per se. We hypothesize that this is the case, and therefore hypothesize that Agreeableness will mediate the relationship between trait EI and Mach (H2).

In the moderation analysis, we test the possibility that the relationship between 'Perceived Emotional Competence' (a component of trait EI) and Mach *depends* on Agreeableness. We argue that the perceived ability to manage and influence emotions is likely to manifest as emotional manipulation and Machiavellianism in individuals who are not 'nice, friendly, good' people to begin with (i.e. low in Agreeableness). Specifically therefore, we hypothesize a significant interaction between trait EI and Agreeableness in the prediction of Mach, such that the relationship between trait EI and Mach will be positive at low levels of Agreeableness (H3).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Our sample comprised 884 workers from a variety of occupations and industries. Most participants in this sample (77.7%) were aged between 26 and 45 years, 16.0% were 46 and older, and 6.3% were under 25 years. Approximately two-thirds of participants were female and one-third were male. Participants came from a wide range of industries: accommodation and food services (3.5%), agriculture, forestry and fishing (3.6%), construction (5.5%), education and training (7.2%), financial services (5.2%), health and social assistance (8.6%), manufacturing (6%), professional, scientific and technical services (6.9%), public administration and safety (4.0%), retail trade (8.8%), transport, Postal and Warehousing (3.2%), and wholesale trade (2%). About half of the participants held executive positions (51.2%). Participants were either managers, (27.3%), senior managers (5.1%), directors, (9.5%), CEOs, (1.9%), presidents, (1.1%), or held other high level administrative positions (34.1%).

We recruited this sample using an Australian-based participant recruitment and data collection company (Empowered Communications). This company has access to a network of over 500 000 Australians who have consented (in advance) to receiving information about various research projects and surveys they can be involved in. Importantly, this company can generate random samples (from their database) of prospective participants from specified populations. Our questionnaire was sent out (via email) to a group of 3000 workers who met our requirements (i.e. full-time employees from a variety of industries in mid to high level