Generalizability of the emotional intelligence construct: A cross-cultural study of North American aboriginal youth

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Abstract

The concept of emotional intelligence (EI) has attracted growing interest from researchers working in various fields. Because culture can influence the experience and expression of emotions, special care needs to be taken when using the EI construct in different cultures. The present study examined the generalizability of the youth form of a widely used self-report measure of EI (EQ-i:YV) in a sample of 384 aboriginal youth from several rural areas in Canada (mean age = 12.5 years). This sample was matched (by age and gender) with a second rural Canadian sample of non-aboriginal youth ($N = 384$). The four-factor model for the measure (separate dimensions for interpersonal, intrapersonal, adaptability, and stress management abilities) was tested using confirmatory factor analysis with both samples. Multiple goodness-of-fit indicators revealed that the model had good fit to the data from both samples. The aboriginal respondents were found to score significantly lower on the interpersonal, adaptability and stress management dimensions compared to the non-aboriginal children. Results are discussed in the context of EI as a vulnerability factor for a number of health-related problems in children and adolescents.
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1. Introduction

Interest in the concept of "emotional intelligence" (EI) emerged in dramatic fashion in 1995 following the publication of Daniel Goleman's book on the topic. One of the myths that quickly emerged from the "media fallout" around this book was the idea that EI was a "new" area of study. However, as various writers have noted (Mayer & Cobb, 2000; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Parker, 2000; Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997), the general area of emotional and social competency has a long history of theoretical and empirical work that extends back to the early 20th century. Another idea accompanying popular discussions about the "new" construct of EI was the claim that EI was an important predictor of achievement in various educational contexts (e.g., Elias, Bruene-Butler, Blum, & Schuyler, 1997; Goleman, 1995; Pasi, 1997). Many individuals were quick to develop new intervention programs for improving various aspects of EI in children and adults (e.g., Elias et al., 1997). Unfortunately, most of these new programs, as well as the initial claim of an important link between EI and achievement, were supported on the basis of very preliminary or non-existent data (Matthews, Roberts, & Zeidner, 2003; Mayer & Cobb, 2000; Zeidner, Roberts, & Matthews, 2002).

One important reason for the poor quality of early work on EI was the problematic state of assessment tools for the construct (Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2001). Intervention programs were being created, but few valid and reliable EI measures were available. Since the late 1990s, however, several new measures have appeared that have sought to correct this problem. Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey (1999) developed a performance-based measure of EI (Multi-Factor Emotional Intelligence Scale; MEIS) in which respondents are asked to solve emotion-related problems (such as recognizing facial expressions). Proponents of these types of performance-based measures contend that they are relatively objective and tap an individual's ability to perform an emotion-related problem (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2000). The MEIS was developed following a model for EI that identifies four broad dimensions: the ability to perceive, appraise and express emotion; the ability to use emotions to facilitate thinking and behavior; the ability to understand and utilize emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions. Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2002) have since revised their instrument (now called the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test; MSCEIT) and begun the process of adapting the tool for use with children and adolescents (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, in press).

Bar-On (1997, 2000) has also proposed a theoretical model for EI that includes four dimensions that overlap substantially with those proposed by Mayer et al. (2000, 2002): intrapersonal (consisting of related abilities like recognizing and labeling one's feelings); interpersonal (consisting of related abilities like identifying emotions in others or empathy); adaptability (consisting of abilities like being able to adjust one's emotions and behaviors to changing situations or conditions); and stress management (consisting of various affect regulating abilities). This model was used to guide the development of the BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i; Bar-On, 1997), a 133-item self-report instrument that assesses all of the dimensions outlined in the model, along with several other relevant variables (e.g., general mood). More recently, the EQ-i has been adapted for use with children and adolescents (Bar-On & Parker, 2000).

As new EI measures have begun to appear, so too has empirical evidence that supports some of the initial enthusiasm directed at the construct. Petrides, Frederickson, and Furnham (2004), for example, examined the relationships among EI, cognitive ability, and academic performance in a