



The relationship between psychological reactance and emotional intelligence



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ABSTRACT

Psychological reactance is a motivational force that may arise when one's freedom is threatened (Brehm, 1966). Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to label and control emotions. The purpose of this study is to explore relationships between reactance and emotional intelligence. A total of 298 undergraduate students (54.4% male) completed a measure of psychological reactance and EI. Results show that males with low behavioral reactance have significantly higher EI subscale scores on well-being, self-control, and emotionality. For females there is no significant difference between high and low behavioral reactance, and any of the EI subscales. However, for verbal reactance males with higher reactance scores have higher EI scores on self-control, well-being, emotionality, and sociability. Females with higher verbal reactance scores have higher EI scores on emotionality and sociability. These findings suggest that the relationship between reactance and EI is somewhat gender dependent and that overall emotionality is highly associated with reactance in both genders.

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1. Introduction

Reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) contends that when one's freedom is lost he or she may engage in a variety of behaviors in order to regain or prevent the loss of freedom. Dowd, Milne, and Wise (1991) break the reactant response down into types of responses, a behavioral response and verbal response. The behavioral response incorporates actual behavior in attempt to regain freedom and the verbal response only includes verbal attempts to

regain control. A person may increase his or her preference for the banned behavior and may attempt to engage in that behavior. Another option might find the person attacking or verbally dismissing the origin of the threat. Finally, a person may engage in different free behavior in order to maintain a sense of independence and control. Reactance responses consist of a number of components (Brehm, 1966). A person must be free to engage in a behavior that may be lost or threatened. The greater the importance of that behavior the more extreme the reaction may be. A similar pattern may be found with regard to the nature of the threat; the stronger the potential threat the greater the reactant response (Brehm, 1966). There are indirect ways in which one may have an adverse reaction to the loss or potential loss of freedom (Brehm, 1966). When behavior is restricted a person may worry about the loss of related behaviors. Also, reactance can occur in a person who witnesses another lose freedom.

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2. Literature review

A number of variables can influence reactant responses. Studies find that situational factors may be important (Biner, 1988; El-Alayli & Messe, 2004; Worchel, Andreoli, & Archer, 1976), as may gender and ethnicity (Seemann, Buboltz, Jenkins, Soper, & Woller, 2004), but not always (Hong, Giannakopoulos, Laing, & Williams, 2001). Other variables such as religiosity and the desire to achieve may influence reactant tendencies (Buboltz, Johnson, & Woller, 2003).

Regarding affect, researchers state that those who are psychologically reactant tend to have fewer positive emotions (Seemann, Buboltz, Thomas, Soper, & Wilkinson, 2005). Empathy may mitigate a reactant response, suggesting that emotions may play a role in reactant responses (Shen, 2010, 2011). Additionally, those high in psychological reactance tend to have less empathy (Dowd, Wallbrown, Sanders, & Yesenosky, 1994).

A theory that may illuminate the relationship between emotions and psychological reactance is emotional intelligence (EI). EI states that emotions are fundamental in navigating one's social milieu (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). EI is the ability to label and control emotions. While there are different understandings of EI, the definition commonly used consists of four components, the ability to: (1) recognize, (2) manage, and (3) control one's emotions, along with (4) using emotions to assist thought.

Emotional intelligence and psychological reactance influence similar behaviors. For example, reactance affects the ability to navigate interpersonal relationships. Chartrand, Dalton, and Fitzsimons (2006) found that individuals who have higher levels of reactance are more likely to unconsciously choose goals that oppose the desires of significant others. Also, both partners in a relationship involving domestic abuse are more likely to have higher levels of psychological reactance (Hockenberry & Billingham, 1993), and those with lower EI scores tend to be at increased risk of engaging in domestic violence (Winters, Clift, & Dutton, 2004). Numerous studies support a link for high EI and healthy relationships between romantic partners (Brackett, Warner, & Bosco, 2005; Schroder-Abe & Schutz, 2011; Schutte et al., 2001; Smith, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2008; Zeidner & Kloda, 2013).

There are wide ranging implications of psychological reactance and EI. Several studies suggest that highly reactant people tend to have negative attitudes toward health messages such as smoking (Thrasher, Boado, Sebrie, & Bianco, 2009; Wiium, Aaro, & Hetland, 2009), binge drinking (Jung, Shim, & Mantaro, 2010), and medication compliance (Madsen, McQuaid, & Craighead, 2009). Conversely, research finds that those taking medications to treat HIV are more likely to follow the medication regime if they have higher EI scores (Willard, 2006). It appears that both reactance and EI influence how people respond to health messages. Interestingly, while most research suggested that reactance is a conscious response one study describes the possibility of non-conscious reactant responses (Wellman & Geers, 2009). This provides evidence that reactance can be an automatic process and not always a chosen one.

Perhaps one of the most fundamental areas of research involving reactance and EI is in the area of mental illness and psychotherapy. High levels of reactance are related to poor treatment outcomes (Seibel & Dowd, 1999), problems with alcohol (Evans & Frank, 2004; Karno & Longabaugh, 2007), and educational deficits. Seibel and Dowd (2001) write about individuals diagnosed with borderline personality disorder who have the highest levels of reactance, while individuals diagnosed as passive-aggressive have the lowest. In youth, reactance is noted as positively correlated with oppositional and narcissistic traits (Frank et al., 1998).

Similarly, deficits in EI are implicated in antisocial (Ali, Amorim, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009; Visser, Bay, Cook, & Myburgh, 2010), borderline (Gardner & Qualter, 2009; Hertel, Schutz, & Lammers, 2009; Leible & Snell, 2004; Sinclair & Feigenbaum, 2012), and schizotypal (Aguirre, Sergi, & Levy, 2008) personality disorders. Considering that personality disorders often involve problems with either emotional regulation or understanding emotions in others it is not surprising to find deficits in EI. Similarly, teenagers who engage in both suicidal and non-suicidal self-harm behavior, such as cutting, may experience EI deficits (Milkolajczak, Petrides, & Hurry, 2009). Poor EI skills may help explain the findings by Kun and Demetrovics (2010) who found in a review of addiction literature that low EI scores tend to correlate with higher rates of smoking, drug, and alcohol use.

Personality variables relate to reactance (Dowd et al., 1994). Dowd et al. (1994) reveal that those who are highly reactant seem less concerned about how they are perceived, are more skeptical of others, and tend toward more rebelliousness. High reactance related to independence, dominance, and assertiveness. Regarding gender differences, highly reactant females are more social, self-confident, and spontaneous than men. This research is somewhat unique in that it highlights positive aspects of reactance; most research treats reactance as a solely negative trait and a sign of maladjustment. In fact, the researchers argue that many of the traits correlated with reactance are found in societal leaders. Often leaders emerge in part because of discontent with political and/or socio-economic trends.

Considering the relationship between trait EI and personality traits like those of the Big 5 Van der Linden, Tsaousis, and Petrides (2012) found that as trait EI increases so does openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extraversion. Results also show a strong negative relationship between EI and neuroticism. Two other studies confirm these findings between the Big 5 and trait EI (Petrides, Vernon, Schermer, Ligthart, Boosma, & Veselka, 2010). Similar results exist for an Indian sample (Hafen, Singh, & Laursen, 2011).

Examination of the relationship between reactance and EI may shed light on how individuals may react or respond in certain situations and provide us with some information on how to intervene. Both reactance and EI appear to work in the social context and have both negative as well as positive aspects. By understanding the relationship we may be able to devise interventions or strategies to mitigate the negative effects. Additionally, research is unclear on the

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