Short Communication

The relationship of trait emotional intelligence with right-wing attitudes and subtle racial prejudice

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ABSTRACT

Although a lot of research attention has already been devoted to the personality and emotional basis of right-wing attitudes and racial prejudice, the relationships between trait Emotional Intelligence (EI) and the latter variables have been largely neglected. In the present study conducted in a heterogeneous sample of adults ($N = 419$), we aim to fill this gap in the literature. It was revealed that trait EI is negatively related to Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Social Dominance Orientation, and subtle racial prejudice. These relationships can be partly explained by empathy, and more specifically the component of perspective taking. Trait EI is negatively related to the ability to take the perspective of others, which in turn is associated with increased right-wing attitudes and subtle racial prejudice.

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Social attitudes are broad beliefs about how society should function and be structured, and can be differentiated into the social-cultural and the economic-hierarchical domains (Duckitt & Sibley, 2009). A frequently studied indicator of the social-cultural domain is Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), which is defined as the covariation of the willingness to submit to authorities, general aggressiveness towards deviants and outgroups, and readiness to adhere to societal norms and traditions (Altemeyer, 1981). A typical indicator of the economic-hierarchical domain is Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), referring to a preference for hierarchically structured and unequal group relations with one group dominating other groups (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Both RWA and SDO are strong predictors of intergroup and sociopolitical outcomes, such as political conservatism, ethnocentrism, and prejudice (e.g., Altemeyer, 1981; Duckitt & Sibley, 2009; Pratto et al., 1994).

An extensive literature has focused on the personality basis of social attitudes, revealing that especially low Openness and low Agreeableness lay at the basis of right-wing attitudes and racial prejudice (for a review, see Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). Other researchers focused on the link of right-wing attitudes and racial prejudice with emotional aspects of life. For example, right-wing attitudes have been related to stronger emotional reactions to negative events (Joel, Burton, & Plaks, 2014), greater experienced threat (Onraet, Dhont, & Van Hiel, 2014), and lesser positive emotions and poorer expression of emotions (Choma, Busseri, & Sadava, 2009). Studies also revealed associations between racial

prejudice and intergroup emotions such as group-based anger and intergroup anxiety (Swart, Hewstone, Christ, & Voci, 2011).

However, what is missing from the literature is a combination of the two research traditions of personality and emotions in explaining right-wing attitudes and racial prejudice. In the present paper, we integrate both these traditions by focusing on trait emotional intelligence. Emotional Intelligence (EI; Salovey & Mayer, 1990) relates to competencies for identifying, processing, and managing emotions (Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2007). Trait EI is a personality dimension that relates to how individuals perceive their emotional abilities (Petrides, 2011; Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007), and it usually measured using self-report measures. Two frequently used scales are the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue; Petrides, 2009), which measures how individuals assess their own ability to manage, understand, interpret, use, and deal with emotions, and the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS; Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994), which measures the perceived inability to identify and describe one's emotions.

We are aware of one study examining the relationship between trait EI and RWA. Based on two student samples, Furnham (2015) reported a non-significant and a weak positive relationship between EI and RWA. However, theoretically, one can expect that trait EI is *negatively* related with right-wing attitudes and racial prejudice. An important explanatory factor for this negative relationship resides in empathy, referring to the recognition of emotions in other individuals and feelings of sympathy for them (Davis, 1983). Studies have shown that individuals with higher EI have a greater ability to experience empathy (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 1999). Furthermore, low empathy lies at the basis of SDO and racial prejudice (Batson et al., 1997; Sidanius et al., 2012; Swart et

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Table 1
Correlations among study's variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. TEIQue-sf	–	− 0.71***	− 0.16***	− 0.19***	− 0.18***	0.28***	0.00
2. TAS	− 0.71***	–	0.28***	0.22***	0.23***	− 0.29***	− 0.13**
3. RWA	− 0.14**	0.26***	–	0.48***	0.54***	− 0.21***	− 0.03
4. SDO	− 0.17***	0.19***	0.48***	–	0.61***	− 0.25***	− 0.24***
5. Subtle racial prejudice	− 0.15**	0.18***	0.53***	0.61***	–	− 0.27***	− 0.15**
6. Perspective taking	0.26***	− 0.26***	− 0.19***	− 0.23***	− 0.24***	–	0.28***
7. Empathic concern	0.03	− 0.11*	− 0.05	− 0.24***	− 0.13*	− 0.29***	–

TEIQue-sf = Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire short scale, TAS = Toronto Alexithymia Scale, RWA = Right-Wing Authoritarianism, SDO = Social Dominance Orientation. Partial correlations, controlling for age, sex, and education are displayed below the diagonal.

  * $p < 0.05$.
 ** $p < 0.01$.
*** $p < 0.001$.

al., 2011). Other studies reported that RWA and empathy are also negatively correlated (Nicol & Rounding, 2013), whereas others have reported non-significant relationships (McFarland, 2010). Given the important role of empathy in right-wing attitudes (especially SDO) and racial prejudice, and the finding that individuals scoring high on EI have a greater ability for empathy, we hypothesized that empathy serves as the explanatory mechanism for the relationship between EI and social and racial prejudiced attitudes. More specifically, people with low trait EI are more likely to have stronger right-wing attitudes and racial prejudice, because they are less empathic compared to individuals with higher trait EI.

In the present study, we examined the relationship of trait EI with right-wing attitudes and subtle racial prejudice. We expected that trait EI is negatively related to right-wing attitudes and subtle racial prejudice. Moreover, we investigated whether empathy mediates this relationship. For empathy, we selected two subscales of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983): the cognitive component of perspective taking, or the tendency to adopt the perspective of others; and the affective component of empathic concern, which measures feelings of empathy and concern for others. The IRI measure is considered a multidimensional measure (Davis, 1983) and empirical studies have often selected separate subscales of the IRI to conduct analyses. We based our choice of subscales on studies showing that perspective taking and empathic concern are the key elements of empathy related to right-wing attitudes and prejudice (Levin et al., 2016; McFarland, 2010).

1. Method

1.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 419 adult participants ($M_{age} = 35.10$ ($SD = 12.94$); 58.2% female) who were recruited by psychology students in exchange for course credits. Each student was asked to recruit a participant with a specific sex, in a specific age group and with a specific level of education, in order to make the sample as heterogeneous as possible. A very small percentage (0.2%) had no formal education, 2.1% had completed primary school, 46.1% secondary school, 51.5% some form of higher education.

1.2. Measures

All self-report measures were administer in a web-based format and were rated on a 5-point Likert-scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) unless stated otherwise. For trait EI, we administered the TEIQue-sf (30 items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree); Petrides & Furnham, 2006; $\alpha = 0.89$, $M = 5.20$, $SD = 0.73$) and the TAS (20 items; Bagby et al., 1994; $\alpha = 0.86$; $M = 2.26$, $SD = 0.56$). Participants also completed an 11-item RWA scale (Altemeyer, 1981; translated to Dutch by Meloen, 1991; $\alpha = 0.82$, $M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.64$), a 14-item SDO

scale (Pratto et al., 1994; translated to Dutch by Van Hiel & Duriez, 2002; $\alpha = 0.87$, $M = 2.29$, $SD = 0.59$), and an 8-item Subtle Racism scale measuring attitudes towards immigrants (based on Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; see Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2005; $\alpha = 0.82$, $M = 2.91$, $SD = 0.63$). Finally, we administered the perspective taking and empathic concern subscales of the IRI (7 items each; Davis, 1983; perspective taking: $\alpha = 0.68$, $M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.50$; empathic concern: $\alpha = 0.73$, $M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.56$).

2. Results

First, we computed correlations between the trait EI measures and the measures probing into right-wing attitudes and subtle racial prejudice. As can be inferred from Table 1 and as expected, trait EI (indicated by scores on TEIque-sf and higher scores on TAS) is negatively related with right-wing attitudes and subtle racial prejudice. Partial correlations, controlling for age, sex, and education (see Table 1 below the diagonal), revealed a similar pattern of results.

Next, we tested the proposed mediations. Specifically, we conducted six mediation analyses, for each measure of trait EI (TEIque-sf and TAS) combined with each outcome (RWA, SDO, and subtle racial prejudice) separately. We tested the two proposed mediators (perspective taking and empathic concern) together in the analyses. Bootstrap analyses (1000 bootstrap samples) using Hayes' Process macro (i.e., Model 4; Hayes, 2013) were employed. Fig. 1 shows that perspective taking (PT) was a significant mediator in all relationships. For empathic concern (EC), we only found significant mediating effects for the relationship between TAS and SDO.[1]

3. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine the relationship of trait EI with right-wing attitudes and subtle racial prejudice. Our main finding is that trait emotional ability is negatively related to RWA, SDO, and subtle racial prejudice. Our study indicates that trait EI plays a role in explaining right-wing attitudes and subtle racial prejudice, which was largely overlooked in the literature so far. Moreover, perspective taking mediated the relationship of EI with social attitudes and subtle racial prejudice across all measures of EI and all dependent measures. In other words, the association between EI and social and racial prejudiced attitudes can be partly explained by low EIs who are less able to take the perspective of others,

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[1] We also performed mediation analyses checking for item overlap between the measures of trait EI and empathy. First, in order to check for item overlap between trait EI and empathy items, we conducted two Principal Components Analyses (one for TEIque-sf and empathy items, and one for TAS and empathy items). We extracted two OBLIMIN rotated dimensions and deleted all items with cross-loadings >0.30, loadings >0.30 on both factors, and primary loadings <0.30. For further analyses with TEIQue-sf, we deleted 4 TEIQue-sf-items and 1 IRI-item, and for the analyses with TAS, we deleted 9 TAS-items and 2 IRI-items. Mediation analyses with these reduced scales revealed similar results as the analyses with the full scales.