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The intergenerational transmission of trait emotional intelligence: The mediating role of parental autonomy support and psychological control

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Trait emotional intelligence (trait EI) is a relevant construct that could promote positive development in adolescents and may predict a number of affect-related outcomes. However, studies focused on its antecedents are still scarce. The main aim of this study is to examine the intergenerational transmission of trait EI from parents to adolescents and the mediating role of parental autonomy support and psychological control.

Methods: Our sample was comprised of 152 cohabiting families, with adolescents (75 males and 77 females) between 16 and 17 years old ($M = 16.45$; $SD = 0.50$).

Results: Results suggested that paternal and maternal trait EI positively predicted paternal and maternal autonomy support and psychological control, and adolescent trait EI was predicted by maternal trait EI, adolescent perception of parental autonomy support and adolescent perception of parental psychological control. Adolescent perception of parental autonomy support and adolescent perception of parental psychological control were shown to act as mediators between adolescents' trait EI and paternal and maternal trait EI.

Conclusions: The results extend the literature on the role of parents in the development of trait EI and confirm the relevance of trait EI for affect-related outcomes.

1. Introduction

Trait emotional intelligence (trait EI) is defined as people's perceptions of their emotional world (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007; Petrides et al., 2016). Trait EI is a wide, hierarchical, multidimensional construct that integrates the longstanding study of emotions from a personality perspective (Petrides et al., 2016). Particularly, trait EI is conceptualized as a constellation of emotional dispositions measurable through self-report (Petrides et al., 2007). Previous studies (Petrides et al., 2016; Resurrección, Salguero, & Ruiz-Aranda, 2014) indicated that trait EI is a relevant construct that could promote a positive development in adolescents and predicts a number of affect-related outcomes. Davis and Humphrey (2012), for example, have shown that trait EI amplified the beneficial relation of active coping with mental health in adolescence. Gugliandolo, Costa, Cuzzocrea, Larcana, and Petrides (2015b) showed also that both self and parental ratings of trait EI relate to self and parental ratings of internalizing and externalizing

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problems. Although, previous studies have amply reported consequence of trait EI, study focused on its antecedents are still scarce.

1.1. Antecedents of trait EI

The most significant contribution to the antecedents and development of trait EI was provided by behavioural genetic studies that have shown a similar pattern of trait EI with broad-bandwidth personality traits (Petrides et al., 2016; Vernon, Petrides, Bratko, & Schermer, 2008; Vernon, Villani, Schermer, & Petrides, 2008). Specifically, previous studies have shown that personality and trait EI have high phenotypic and genetic correlations (van der Linden, Tsaousis, Petrides, 2017; van der Linden et al., 2018), suggesting that trait EI and personality could have similar heritability estimates and mechanisms. Traditional researches (Bouchard, 1993; Jang, Livesley, & Vernon, 1996; Rushton, Bons, & Hur, 2008) estimates heritability of personality at approximately 50%, and several studies have shown that personality development takes place partly due to environmental influences and partly from hereditary aspects, facilitating transmission from one generation to another (Kitamura et al., 2009; Krueger, South, Johnson, & Iacono, 2008). The correlation between the level of trait EI for parents and offspring reported by Vernon, Petrides et al. (2008) was also in line with literature on intergenerational transmission of personality (Kitamura et al., 2009; McAdams et al., 2014). These studies generally indicated that parents' rearing style assists as a partial mediator in the transmission of parental characteristics to their offspring (Kitamura et al., 2009; McAdams et al., 2014). Although in the literature there has not been any evidence of a mediating role for parenting in the intergenerational transmission of trait EI, some indirect evidence has been provided by studies that reported the relation between the trait EI for parents and offspring.

1.2. Parenting and trait EI

Although, the theoretical frameworks of emotional development (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007), showed that parenting practices are significantly related with adolescents' emotional domain, little research has been conducted in the specific field of parenting and trait EI (Alegre, 2011). Specifically, Alegre and Benson (2010) showed that parental availability and harsh parental discipline were significantly correlated with adolescents' trait EI. Argyriou, Bakoyannis, and Tantaros (2016) reported in their correlational study that trait EI was statistically significant for parental authoritativeness and authoritarianism. In another cross-sectional study, Abdollahi, Talib, and Motalebi (2013) have shown a positive correlation between trait EI and supportive parenting style and a negative correlation between trait EI and neglectful parenting style perceived by late adolescents.

Recent studies reported that autonomy-supportive parenting and parental psychological control were demonstrated as crucial for adolescent emotional development (Brenning, Soenens, Van Petegem, & Vansteenkiste, 2015; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). However, few studies have dealt with investigating the relationship of trait EI with parental psychological control and autonomy support. Specifically, Gugliandolo, Costa, Cuzzocrea, and Larcán (2015a) showed in a cross-sectional study that parental psychological control is negatively related with trait EI and that trait EI was a mediator in the relation between perceptions of parental psychological control and maladjustment. Asghari and Besharat (2011) instead found a significant correlation between perception of paternal autonomy support and trait EI in adolescents.

1.3. Parental autonomy support and psychological control

Parental autonomy support is a form of parenting that exerts a strong influence on the development of the emotional world of adolescents and facilitates the establishment of a secure, stable, and positive sense of self (Brenning et al., 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomy-supportive parenting tends to be empathetic, encouraging adolescents to express their emotions and desires. Furthermore, this type of parenting offers meaningful choices to adolescents and creates a warm environment that allows discussion of rules and exploration and reflection of emotions. In contrast, the opposite pole of parental autonomy support is represented by psychological control. Psychologically controlling parents ignore adolescents' perspectives and use manipulative behaviours such as guilt-tripping and emotional cut-off to impose their own viewpoints, thereby reducing adolescents' expression of opinions and emotions (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Parental autonomy support yields various benefits and promotes optimal psychosocial development in adolescents (Vasquez, Patal, Fong, Corrigan, & Pine, 2016). Several studies have shown in fact that autonomy support is positively correlated with well-being (van der Kaap-Deeder, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, & Mabbe, 2017), socio-emotional development (Matte-Gagné, Harvey, Stack, & Serbin, 2015) and vitality (Costa, Cuzzocrea, Gugliandolo, & Larcán, 2016). At the opposite, parental psychological control is consistently associated with maladjustment and ill-being (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). Previous studies have shown, in fact, positive relations with depressive symptoms (Bleys, Soenens, Claes, Vliegen, & Luyten, 2018), frustration intolerance (Filippello, Harrington, Costa, Buzzai, & Sorrenti, 2018) and relational aggression (Baumgardner & Boyatzis, 2017). Although abundant research emphasized the importance of parental psychological controlling and autonomy-supportive behaviours for adolescent emotional development, evidence on the association between parental psychological control, parental autonomy support and trait EI is limited (Gugliandolo et al., 2015a). Furthermore, in accordance with the literature on the intergenerational transmission of personality (Kitamura et al., 2009; McAdams et al., 2014), parental trait EI could be also a plausible antecedent of parental autonomy support and parental psychological control.

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