



## Emotional Intelligence and Day-To-Day Emotion Regulation Processes: Examining Motives for Social Sharing



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### ABSTRACT

There is growing interest in the emotion regulation processes that underlie the adaptive functioning of emotionally intelligent individuals. This study uses experience sampling to examine whether the emotional intelligence (EI) of undergraduate students ( $N = 84$ ) relates to their day-to-day use of five emotion regulation processes over a five-day period. We also test whether EI predicts motives for one of the emotion regulation processes (social sharing). We measure both ability EI (the brief Situational Test of Emotion Management) and self-rated EI (the Self-Rated Emotional Intelligence Scale). Self-rated EI significantly predicts more social sharing, direct situation modification and reappraisal. Ability EI does not significantly predict any of the five regulation processes. Both ability and self-rated EI are significantly related to greater bonding and relief motives for social sharing. Self-rated EI is also related to recovery motives. These results suggest that it is the self-beliefs about one's emotional abilities, rather than emotion knowledge, which influence the emotion regulation processes people use in daily life.

### 1. Introduction

Emotional intelligence (EI) and emotion regulation are two conceptually related approaches to understanding the emotional experiences people have. EI describes individual differences in the abilities and traits involved in perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotions (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2016) whereas emotion regulation describes the processes by which people control which emotions they have and when they have them (Gross, 1999). We know that some emotion regulation processes are more effective than others in controlling negative emotions (e.g., perspective taking is generally effective whereas ruminating is generally ineffective; Bushman, 2002; Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010) and that emotionally intelligent people experience fewer negative emotions (Sanchez-Alvarez, Extremera, & Fernandez-Berrocal, 2016). What is still largely unclear is whether individual differences in EI relate to differences in the emotion regulation processes people use. The current research proposes to address this by examining whether ability and self-rated EI predict the use of five different emotion regulation processes in daily life. We also examine whether EI predicts differences in people's motivations for socially sharing their emotions. Given the importance of both EI and emotion regulation to mental health and wellbeing outcomes, our research is relevant for understanding the mechanisms by which person-

attributes (EI) translate into behaviours (regulation) known to increase such outcomes.

#### 1.1. Emotional intelligence

While some researchers define EI as a broad set of trait-like variables related to emotion, motivation and social functioning, the current paper uses the commonly accepted Four-Branch Ability Model of EI (Mayer et al., 2016). These four ability branches are: (1) accurate perception of emotion in oneself and others (perception); (2) use of emotions to facilitate problem-solving or task completion (facilitation); (3) understanding how emotions combine and change over time (understanding); and (4) successful regulation of one's own and others' emotions (management). This model forms the theoretical basis for both: (a) *ability EI*, where test-takers must process emotion-related information to answer a question (e.g., judge which of several responses would be most effective in regulating the emotion in a specific situation); and (b) *self-rated EI*, where test-takers rate how well they think they perceive, use, understand, or manage emotions (e.g., "I know how to keep calm in difficult or stressful situations" (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006). In the current study, we examine both self-rated EI and ability EI as predictors of the regulation processes people use in daily life. Our ability EI task measures emotion

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management, as this skill set is the most complex (requiring skills from the other branches) and most conceptually relevant to emotion regulation (Mayer et al., 2016).

### 1.2. Emotion regulation

Gross (1999) identifies five families of emotion regulation processes which occur at different points in the emotion-generation process: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation. The current study examines five specific regulation processes drawn from four of these families: *direct situation modification* (taking practical actions to make a direct impact on an emotion-eliciting situation), *distraction* (directing attention away from the emotion-eliciting features of a situation), *rumination* (directing attention to negative thoughts and feelings, and the causes of these), *reappraisal* (changing one's interpretation of an emotion-eliciting situation), and *social sharing* (recounting an emotional episode to others). Direct situation modification is drawn from situation modification, distraction and rumination from emotional deployment, reappraisal from cognitive change, and social sharing from response modulation. In the current study, we use experience sampling to measure emotion regulation (where people report their experiences in the moment), thus avoiding the memory biases that can occur in questionnaire research (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987).

### 1.3. EI and emotion regulation

Many of the abilities required to engage in specific emotion regulation processes are named by Mayer et al. (2016) as critical elements of EI. For example, all types of attention deployment processes logically involve the ability to “prioritize thinking by directing attention” (Mayer et al., 2016 p. 294), which is an element of emotion facilitation ability. Both distraction and positive reappraisal require that a person identify the emotion-eliciting element of the situation (so as to divert attention away from it, or re-appraise it), which would require emotion understanding ability. Moreover, using effective regulation processes requires that one plan, monitor and evaluate the processes one is using (so as to use the effective ones more, and ineffective ones less), which are core elements of emotion management ability (Mayer et al., 2016). However, the driver of emotion regulation behaviours may not necessarily be the ability to regulate (ability EI) but also the belief that one has the ability. That is, people do things not just because they can, but because they think they can.

There is surprisingly little research on ability EI and regulation. In Peña-Sarrionandia, Mikolajczak, and Gross' (2015) recent summary of the literature linking EI to different emotion regulation strategies: (1) few studies use ability EI (80% of the findings are based on self-reported EI; most summaries of ability EI rely on the findings of a single study); (2) no studies examine the relationship between EI and social sharing; and (3) no studies examine the EI/emotion regulation relationship using experience sampling to measure regulation in daily life. It is for these reasons that we designed our study to examine both ability and self-rated EI, to use experience sampling, and to focus on social sharing and the motives for it.

Existing research suggests that EI should relate to higher situation modification, reappraisal and distraction but lower rumination. Specifically, Peña-Sarrionandia et al. (2015) reported that both self-rated and ability EI related to less rumination. Self-rated EI also related to greater direct situation modification, positive reappraisal and greater distraction (there was no research reported for ability EI and these regulation strategies). The largest effect was for reappraisal and the smallest for distraction. Other research has shown that ability EI relates to greater task-focused coping, which is conceptually equivalent to direct situation modification (Davis & Humphrey, 2012; MacCann, Fogarty, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2011; Zeidner & Hadar, 2014). Ability EI also shows a small positive relationship with positive reappraisal

(Gohm, Corser, & Dalsky, 2005; Mestre, Núñez-Lozano, Gómez-Molinero, Zayas, & Guil, 2017). While there is no known research on ability EI and distraction, Peña-Sarrionandia et al. (2015) predict positive relationships based on the regulatory advantages of this strategy.

There is also no research on social sharing for either self-rated or ability EI, yet Peña-Sarrionandia et al. (2015) posit a negative relationship. They argue that social sharing occurs late in the emotion regulation process (during response modulation), and that people with high EI should have less need for sharing as they use strategies that influence earlier points in the emotional trajectory. However, people with high EI have greater perceived social support (Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003). They therefore have more opportunities to socially share, given the greater availability of a social network to share with. Moreover, EI relates to seeking social support for both instrumental and emotional reasons (Gohm et al., 2005; Goldenberg, Matheson, & Mantler, 2006). Seeking social support plausibly often involves sharing one's feelings about a situation with others to acquire their support. We therefore hypothesize that higher EI would be linked with greater social sharing, counter to Peña-Sarrionandia et al. (2015).

### 1.4. Different types of social sharing

One reason it is difficult to predict the EI/social sharing relationship is the complex nature of social sharing. Rimé (2009) proposed a two-mode theory of social sharing. The cognitive mode helps the sharer progress towards emotional recovery whereas the socio-affective mode brings only a sense of temporary relief. Recovery is more likely when the sharing partner helps the sharer see things from a new perspective. Relief results from the sharing partner providing validation, comfort and support. Sharing most commonly develops in the socio-affective mode and the cognitive mode occurs much more rarely (Rimé, 2007).

Measuring the mode of social sharing is difficult as it relies on the sharing partner as well as the sharer. However, the sharer's motivations should play a key role in which mode is used. In the current study, we consider three types of motivation: *recovery motives* (sharing to gain new perspectives or advice); *relief motives* (sharing to vent or arouse empathy) and *bonding motives* (sharing to strengthen social bonds) (Duprez, Christophe, Rimé, Congard, & Antoine, 2015). Recovery motives and relief motives conceptually link to the cognitive and socio-affective modes of social sharing respectively. As relief motives are frequently reported (Duprez et al., 2015; Rimé, 2007) and feeling understood is a basic need (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999), we do not believe relief motives will relate to EI. Recovery motives, while used rarely, are more adaptive and might therefore be used more often by emotionally intelligent people. Bonding motives were considered important for inclusion in the current study because high EI people may socially share in order to maintain their intimate relationships (Lopes et al., 2003), rather than for regulatory purposes alone.

### 1.5. Study hypotheses

**Hypothesis 1.** EI will be significantly related to emotion regulation processes, showing a positive relationship with direct modification, distraction, reappraisal and social sharing, and a negative relationship with rumination. These relationships will hold for both ability EI (Hypothesis 1a) and self-rated EI (Hypothesis 1b).

**Hypothesis 2.** EI will be significantly positively related to bonding and recovery motives for social sharing but not significantly related to relief motives. These relationships will hold for both ability EI (Hypothesis 2a) and self-rated EI (Hypothesis 2b).

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