



## Trait emotional intelligence and social capital: The emotionally unintelligent may occasionally be better off

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### ABSTRACT

The relationship of trait emotional intelligence (EI) with workplace social capital was investigated in 172 individuals in middle and middle-upper organizational ranks. Social capital was operationalized as: mentoring provision for protégés, expressive networking ties, and instrumental network ties. Two out of the three identified relationships were quadratic. In particular, the relationship of mentoring provision and expressive network ties with EI were of U-shaped nature with overall positive linear trends, while that of instrumental network ties with EI was purely linear and positive. The findings suggest that though in most cases the strongest social capital is possessed by those with high scores on trait EI, low EI may also often offer advantages. Extant knowledge about trait EI is utilized to provide an account for the findings, while there is brief discussion of their implications for theory and future research.

### 1. Introduction

Social capital means resources, such as support, influence and information individuals possess by means of their relationship ties with others within a particular social context (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Social capital is connected with favourable social and psychological outcomes in all life domains (e.g., Jovanovic, 2016). Given its importance, it is of value to identify individual characteristics, such as traits, that contribute to the accumulation of social capital (Gibson, Hardy, & Buckley, 2014). Such a candidate trait is trait emotional intelligence (EI) (Bar-On, 1997; Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Trait EI is located at the lower levels of trait personality hierarchies (De Raad, 2005; Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007; Van der Linden et al., 2017) and personality plays a major role in inter-personal interactions that produce the ties of social capital (Wolff & Kim, 2012). Indeed, high trait EI is associated with closer and more satisfying inter-personal relationships (Maher, Winston, & Rani, 2017; Mavroveli, Petrides, Rieffe, & Bakker, 2007), which form the basis of social capital. Furthermore, it appears that the definition and measurement of EI as a trait stands on firmer grounds than the definition and, especially, measurement of EI as ability (Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2012; Petrides, 2011; Petrides et al., 2016). Finally, it appears that in general trait EI is more strongly associated with outcomes than ability EI is (e.g., O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2011; Sánchez-Álvarez, Extremera, & Fernández-Berrocal, 2016).

Workplace social capital is comprehensively understood as the sum of all inter-personal network ties and any mentoring relationships the individual maintains within the workplace (Bozionelos, 2015). A mentoring relationship is an exclusive one-to-one tie between a senior (the mentor) and a junior colleague (the protégé) that involves substantial intimacy and mutuality (Kram, 1985). In the present work we consider mentoring from the perspective of being a mentor because participants found themselves in middle and middle-upper hierarchical ranks, hence, they are able to provide mentoring for less senior colleagues. Network ties are distinguished into instrumental and expressive, whose primary functions are socio-emotional support and the advancement of career and professional interests of the individual, respectively (Saint-Charles & Mongeau, 2009). Therefore, the work at hand investigated the relationship of EI with social capital, viewed in terms of mentoring provision, expressive network ties and instrumental network ties.

### 2. Hypotheses

Considering the characteristics (higher-order factors and facets) of trait EI (Bar-On, 1997; Petrides, 2009; Petrides & Furnham, 2001) it is sensible to expect associations with provision of mentoring and network ties. For example, providing mentoring is partly a prosocial act (Allen, 2003), and the empathy facet of EI should prompt the individual to provide mentoring support to less senior colleagues. Furthermore,

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particular domain characteristics of EI, such as perceived interpersonal competence, optimism and self-esteem, make people attractive as mentors (Olian, Carroll, Giannantonio, & Feren, 1988).

**Hypothesis 1.** EI will be positively related to mentoring provision.

EI facets include empathy, ability to develop fulfilling personal relationships, capacity to detect others' emotions and to communicate one's own emotions. These capacities should favour the formation of expressive ties in the workplace because the individual will show interest in others' issues and perspectives along with willingness to intimate. Furthermore, the EI facets of optimism and happiness should make the individual attractive as an expressive tie because people with a positive outlook of life are preferred as friends (e.g., Vollmann, Renner, & Weber, 2007).

**Hypothesis 2.** EI will be positively related to expressive network ties.

Domain EI characteristics such as flexibility and willingness to adapt (the adaptability facet), confidence, and feelings of being successful (Bar-On, 1997; Petrides, 2009) should motivate the development of relationship ties in the workplace with the purpose of increasing the individual's prospects of success. Further, EI facets such as social awareness, ability to manage others' emotions and to regulate own emotions should also favour the building of instrumental ties.

**Hypothesis 3.** EI will be positively related to instrumental network ties.

Though hypotheses assumed positive linear associations, recent work reveals non-linear, and in particular quadratic, relationships between social capital and personality, (e.g., Bozionelos, 2017; Bozionelos, Bozionelos, Polychroniou, & Kostopoulos, 2014). It was therefore considered prudent to also test for quadratic associations because presuming linear relationships without testing for non-linearity may compromise our knowledge and accuracy of prediction (e.g., Jorm & Christensen, 2004). No specific expectations for the form of quadratic relationships could be contemplated because the type of non-linearity (for example, U-shaped or inverted U-shaped) depends on the particular personality trait (Bozionelos, 2017; Bozionelos et al., 2014), and EI relates differentially with each big-five and Giant Three trait (De Raad, 2005; Petrides et al., 2007).

### 2.1. Research question

To investigate whether quadratic equations describe the relationship of EI with mentoring provision, expressive and instrumental network ties more accurately than linear equations.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants

Participants were 172 (72 women, 100 men) British origin individuals occupying positions in medium to upper hierarchical levels of a large financial services institution in the United Kingdom. They were fulfilling a variety of roles ranging from software development and IT support management, to accounting, fund management, senior financial analysis, and department management. The organization had no formal mentoring system in place, hence, the mentoring tapped in the study was informal. Table 1 presents demographic statistics.

### 3.2. Measures

#### 3.2.1. Emotional intelligence

This was assessed with 15 items from Schutte et al.'s (1998) scale. These items formed the largest factor of the unrotated solution in a factor analysis (maximum likelihood estimate) of the 28 unambiguous items of the scale identified by Gignac, Palmer, Manocha, and Stough (2005). A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicated satisfactory data

fit ( $\chi^2$  [53] = 116.75,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = 0.965; TLI = 0.930; RMSEA = 0.081; SRMR = 0.046). Cronbach  $\alpha$  was 0.90.

#### 3.2.2. Expressive and instrumental network ties

These were measured with the respective three-item scales of Bozionelos' (2003) instrument. The measure is unaffected by social desirability (Bozionelos, 2003) and it has been extensively validated in empirical research, for example, it predicts supervisor-rated job performance and employability (Van der Klink, Van der Heijden, Boon, & Van Rooij, 2014; Wei, Chiang, & Wu, 2012). Cronbach alphas were 0.63 and 0.65, which are marginally acceptable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). A CFA with items loading on their hypothesized factors indicated acceptable data fit ( $\chi^2$  [7] = 16.79,  $p < .05$ ; CFI = 0.982; TLI = 0.961; RMSEA = 0.090; SRMR = 0.083), hence, adequate discriminant validity between the scales to utilize as measures of distinct constructs.

#### 3.2.3. Mentoring provision

That was measured with the eight-item scale of Bozionelos (2004). Cronbach  $\alpha$  was 0.97. The scale has proven validity, for example, it predicts outcomes such as probabilities of promotion, financial attainment and job performance (Bozionelos, Bozionelos, Kostopoulos, & Polychroniou, 2001; Liu, Liu, Kwan, & Mao, 2009), while responses on it are not affected by social desirability (Bozionelos, 2004).

#### 3.2.4. Controls

These included the big-five, assessed with the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992), gender (male: 1, female: 2), age, educational attainment, organizational tenure, and technical vs. generalist position.

## 4. Results

Hypotheses were tested with hierarchical regressions. The controls (first step) were followed by the big-five traits (second step), and EI (third step). To test the research question, squared EI scores were added as fourth step (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). EI scores were centred (Cohen et al., 2003).

The research question was tested first because hypotheses presumed linear relationships that could be examined only once quadratic associations had been ruled out. The squared term of EI significantly added to the variance accounted for in expressive network ties ( $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $t = 2.89$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $\Delta R^2_{adj.} = 0.021$ ;  $F\Delta[1, 159] = 8.33$ ,  $p < .01$ ; total  $R^2_{adj.} = 0.533$ ; total  $F[12, 159] = 17.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ) over and above the first-order EI term ( $\beta = 0.44$ ,  $t = 4.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\Delta R^2_{adj.} = 0.035$ ;  $F\Delta[1, 160] = 12.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ), the big-five ( $\Delta R^2_{adj.} = 0.192$ ;  $F\Delta[5, 161] = 12.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the controls ( $\Delta R^2_{adj.} = 0.296$ ;  $F\Delta[5, 166] = 15.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, EI squared significantly contributed to mentoring provision ( $\beta = 0.34$ ,  $t = 6.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\Delta R^2_{adj.} = 0.077$ ;  $F\Delta = 43.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ; total  $R^2_{adj.} = 0.714$ ; total  $F = 36.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ) over and above the first-order EI term ( $\beta = 0.12$ ,  $t = 1.52$ ,  $ns$ ;  $\Delta R^2_{adj.} = 0$ ;  $F\Delta = 0.6$ ,  $ns$ ), the big-five ( $\Delta R^2_{adj.} = 0.211$ ;  $F\Delta = 20.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the controls ( $\Delta R^2_{adj.} = 0.426$ ;  $F\Delta = 26.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This meant quadratic relationships, hence, hypotheses 1 and 3 could not be tested as such. The positive signs of the squared and the first-order terms indicated U-shaped curves with overall positive linear trends (Cohen et al., 2003). The points of bending were at 0.17 and 1.16 SDs below the mean EI scores. The curves are presented in Figs. 1 and 2.

The squared term of EI did not significantly improve the variance accounted for in instrumental network ties ( $\beta = -0.04$ ,  $t = -0.59$ ,  $ns$ ;  $\Delta R^2_{adj.} = 0$ ;  $F\Delta[1, 159] = 0.34$ ,  $ns$ ; total  $R^2_{adj.} = 0.580$ ; total  $F[12, 159] = 20.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which allowed testing of Hypothesis 2. The first-order coefficient of EI in the three-step hierarchical regression (without the squared term) was significant and positive ( $\beta = 0.59$ ,  $t = 6.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\Delta R^2_{adj.} = 0.116$ ;  $F\Delta[1, 160] = 45.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ;

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