Bad past, gloomy future: The trait emotional intelligence profile of juvenile offenders

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ABSTRACT

Low EI is claimed to be implicated in various maladaptive behaviors, including adolescent delinquency. In this study, we sought to establish whether juvenile delinquents are indeed lower on trait EI compared to their peers from the nonclinical population. Study participants were 45 convicted juvenile offenders (all male, $M_{age} = 16.44$) and 54 adolescents from the general population (all male, $M_{age} = 14.24$), equaling with respect to years of schooling. All participants completed the Serbian translation of the TEIQue-AF. According to the results of ANCOVAs, with age as the covariate, the delinquent group scored significantly lower on global trait EI, and on three out of its four factors: Emotionality, Well-being, and Self-control. Thus, the delinquents exhibit lower self-efficacy when it comes to perceiving, expressing, and regulating emotions, and are more likely to have a gloomy vision of their present and future. Implications for assessment and possible intervention programs are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Psychological research has been successful in identifying a number of factors involved in the occurrence of juvenile delinquency. These range from higher Neuroticism and Psychoticism (Le Corff & Toupin, 2009; Dåderman, 1999) and lower Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (Le Corff & Toupin, 2009), regarding the level of basic personality traits, to higher Disrespect for Rules, Depression, and Need for Stimulation, in terms of Eysenckian primary scales (Levine & Jackson, 2004). The list goes on to include higher impulsivity and psychopathy (Dåderman, 1999; Dåderman & Kristiansson, 2003, 2004), low empathic capacity (Milojević & Dimitrijević, 2014), as well as early trauma, insecure attachment, and poor mentalization (Fonagy et al., 1997; Taubner & Curth, 2013). It further encompasses more cognitive qualities such as lower IQ (Levine, 2011), dyslexia (Selenius, Dåderman, & Hellström, 2006), inadequate social learning (Agnew, 2009), and poor moral judgment (Stams et al., 2006).

Not surprisingly, emotional intelligence (EI) has also entered the picture as a suitable candidate for the list of factors implicated in juvenile delinquency: low EI is claimed to put individuals at risk for various maladaptive behaviors, including those which may be characterized as antisocial, deviant, and delinquent (e.g., Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2009). Such claims are primarily grounded in data obtained with non-offender samples, but there have also been efforts to explore the EI status of convicted juvenile offenders. We shall briefly review both types of evidence in turn.

2. EI and deviant/externalizing behaviors in non-convicted (pre)adolescents

In one of the earliest studies related to the present issue, Brackett, Mayer, and Warner (2004) found lower *ability EI* in male college students to be associated with self-reported harmful (i.e., illegal drug and alcohol use) and deviant behaviors (e.g., engaging in physical fights, vandalizing). The link with negative behaviors has also been established for *trait EI* and at younger ages. Specifically, Petrides's research group has reported that EI, defined as a constellation of emotional self-perceptions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007) and measured by the TEIQue, is negatively associated with secondary school students' unauthorized absences and exclusions from school (Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004), as well as with sixth-graders' peer nominations for being disruptive and aggressive, and an antisocial factor derived from teacher nominations of children from the same group (Petrides, Sangareau, Furnham, & Frederickson, 2006). More recently, low trait EI has also been found to be conducive of maladaptive behaviors such as bullying or victimization (Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2012), and associated with both self- and parent-reported externalizing behaviors in adolescents (Gugliandolo, Costa, Cuzzocrea, Larcan, & Petrides, 2015). The latter finding mirrors the result of a previous study reporting that low self-

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reported EI, assessed via Bar-On's EQ, is related to significantly more externalizing behaviors in 10-year-olds (Santesso, Reker, Schmidt, & Segalowitz, 2006).

2.1. EI in convicted juvenile offenders

Only a handful of studies (two of them published fairly recently) tell us anything about the purported association between low EI and actual criminal behavior in (pre)adolescence. The most comprehensive of these is probably Hayes and Reilly's (2013) study of Irish male juvenile detainees, who were tested for both ability and trait EI (with the MSCEIT: Youth Version and Bar-On's EQ, respectively) and found to score significantly lower on both measures when compared to a regular community sample. The same source also reports the results of a Chinese study by Wang (2002, in Hayes & Reilly, 2013), which found juvenile prisoners to perform significantly poorer on the MSCEIT than a control group of high-school students. Likewise, in a recent study focusing on one aspect of EI, namely, emotion perception (Bowen, Morgan, Moore, & van Goozen, 2014), young offenders were shown to be less efficient in recognizing negative emotions (i.e., sadness, disgust, and fear), at least at certain intensities. However, adding some complexity to the picture, particularly when it comes to *trait EI*, an earlier study (Moriarty, Stough, Tidmarsh, Eger, & Dennison, 2001) did not establish lower scores on the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS) for a sample of 15 adolescent sex-offenders; in fact, the offenders outscored the control group on one TMMS factor — Attention to Feelings.

2.2. Aim and rationale of the present study

The aim of the present study was to establish the trait-EI profile of juvenile offenders as compared to adolescents from the general (non-clinical) population. We chose *trait* EI as the focus of our attention for several reasons. First, there have so far been only two studies assessing juvenile offenders' trait EI, and their results are inconsistent: in one instance (Hayes & Reilly, 2013), juvenile offenders scored lower on trait EI, in the other they did not (Moriarty et al., 2001). The latter study was conducted on a very small and highly selected sample (15 sex-offenders), raising the question of the generalizability of results, whereas the former study left the trait EI profile of young offenders incomplete: facing inadequate reliability levels for the subscales of Bar-On's inventory, Hayes and O'Reilly had to exclude most of the EQ factors from further analyses. Finally, neither of the two studies utilized the most comprehensive measure of trait EI, the TEIQue (Petrides, 2009), which has repeatedly demonstrated excellent psychometric properties, including validity in relation to deviant behaviors in non-convicted (pre)adolescents (Petrides et al., 2004, 2006).

Building precisely on the research which has evidenced lower TEIQue scores in children and adolescents exhibiting more deviant behaviors, we hypothesized that juvenile offenders would be characterized by lower trait EI in comparison to their peers from the nonclinical population.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Study participants were 45 convicted juvenile offenders (all male, $M_{age} = 16.44$, $SD_{age} = .73$) and 54 adolescents from the general population (all male, $M_{age} = 14.24$, $SD_{age} = 1.84$). The two groups were matched by years of schooling; this resulted in a significant difference with respect to age ($F_{(1, 98)} = 56.59$, p < .001), since many participants in the delinquent group had repeated one or several grades. Although participants were not matched by cognitive ability, it was made sure that all of them were of normal intellectual capacity. Twenty

participants from the delinquent group had been detained for violent crimes, and 25 for nonviolent offenses.

3.2. Measures

All participants completed the Serbian version of the *Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire – Adolescent Form* (TEIQue–AF; Petrides, 2009), a 153-item self-report measure yielding a global trait EI score, as well as scores on four factors (i.e., Well-being, Self-control, Emotionality, and Sociability) and 15 facets (i.e., Adaptability, Assertiveness, Emotion expression, Emotion management, Emotion perception, Emotion regulation, low Impulsiveness, maintaining Relationships skills, Self-esteem, Self-motivation, Social awareness, Stress management, Trait empathy, Trait happiness, and Trait optimism). Example items representing the four factors are as follows: "I believe I'm full of personal strengths"; "I can handle most difficulties in my life in a cool and calm manner"; "I often pause and think about my feelings"; and "I can deal well with people".

The Serbian TEIQue–AF was derived from the same-language adult form of the instrument, which had been adapted following the standard procedure of translation–backtranslation, and has hitherto evidenced good to excellent reliability, as well as structural, convergent-discriminant, and predictive validity (Jolić Marjanović & Altaras Dimitrijević, 2014). Internal consistencies for the global TEIQue–AF score established in the present study were $\alpha = .86$ and .92 in the delinquent and the control group, respectively. Alphas for the four factors ranged from .79 to .92, and from .42 to .76 for the 15 facets.

3.3. Procedure

The juvenile offenders were tested individually in a rehabilitation institution in Kruševac, Serbia. Despite being of normal intellectual capacity and having adequate reading skills, some participants required assistance in grasping the meaning of particular words and items (e.g., those referring to the interpretation of "closeness" as intimacy rather than physical proximity). The Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs had issued a permission to the first author to enter the Institution for research purposes. All participants were also informed about the details of the study and signed the informed consent forms. In the course of the testing session, some participants declined responding to another instrument included in the battery (one related to attachment to the father), but none of them had any objections to filling in the TEIQue.

Participants from the control group were tested during classes in one primary and two secondary schools in Belgrade. The schools' managements had allowed students' participation in the study; parents were also informed about the research, and the students themselves introduced to the rules of confidentiality and anonymity, upon which they signed the informed consent forms. Again, none of the students refused to fill in the questionnaire, but a small percentage of protocols was excluded from further analyses due to obviously invalid response patterns.

4. Results

Given the significant age difference between the delinquent and the control group, a series of ANCOVAs were performed including age as a covariate. The results indicated significant effects of group membership on global trait EI and three out of four factors (Well-being, Emotionality, and Self-control), with the delinquents scoring consistently lower than the controls (Table 1). A significant effect of age was observed only for the Emotionality factor ($F_{(1, 96)} = 4.14$, p = .04, d = .40).

In view of the low alphas (< .70) for most of the 15 TEIQue-AF facets, differences between the delinquent and the control group were not inspected at this level. However, to gain a closer insight into what the participants actually reported, we also performed a series of item-level ANCOVAs, which revealed that the most pronounced between-group