



Testing the incremental validity of Trait Emotional Intelligence: Evidence from an Italian sample of adolescents



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ABSTRACT

The present study was aimed at validating the Italian version of the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire–Adolescent Full Form (TEIQue–AFF), as well as at exploring its incremental validity over emotional maladjustment. To this end, a sample of 351 (163 males) Italian adolescents was collected. Overall, the Italian TEIQue–AFF both replicated the original–English four-factor structure (Well-Being, Self-Control, Emotionality, Sociability), and its construct validity was confirmed. However, reliability coefficients for eight facets and two factors were low. In addition, at all levels of analysis (i.e., global, factor, facet) the TEIQue–AFF was found to be a significant incremental predictor of adolescent's emotional maladjustment, over and above gender, IQ, and the Big Five personality dimensions. At the factor level, significant effects were related to the contribution of the factor Well-Being thus supporting perspectives arguing for a further refinement of trait EI content domain. Implications of the findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Trait EI refers to emotion-related dispositions and self-perceived abilities measured via self-reports. Specifically the construct of trait EI has been formally defined as a constellation of emotional self-perceptions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). Studies on samples of adolescents have shown that trait EI may act as protective agent against emotional maladjustment, as lower trait EI levels have been found to be associated to internalizing symptoms such as depression in clinical (Delhay, Kempnaers, Stroobants, Goossens, & Linkowski, 2012), as well as in normal samples (Williams, Daley, Burnside, & Hammond-Rowley, 2010).

One of the main criticism raised against trait EI refers to its lack of incremental validity, particularly considering the construct's overlap with the basic personality dimensions (Harms & Credé, 2010). Yet, it has been argued that advancement of the construct depends on whether EI is able to explain a significant proportion of incremental and unique variance in psychological outcomes over and above known predictors (Fiori & Antonakis, 2011). However, it is noteworthy that the construct of trait EI is thought to be related to higher order personality traits rather than being

independent of them, thus justifying a certain degree of overlap between dimensions.

Given the relevance of measurement to move towards a science of EI (Zeidner, Roberts, & Matthews, 2004), in the present study the incremental validity of the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue; Petrides, 2009) was systematically investigated over anxiety and depression symptoms, as indicators of non-clinical internalizing problems during adolescence. The TEIQue was developed in order to cover the 15 facets of the trait EI's sampling domain comprehensively, which in turn load on four-factors, namely Well-Being, Self-Control, Emotionality, and Sociability. To date, the TEIQue is one of the most widely used and valid measures of trait EI (Martins, Ramalho, & Morin, 2010). As the full adolescent form of the TEIQue (TEIQue–AFF) allows for investigations at the factor as well as the facet level, it appears to be particularly suitable for a complete test of the construct's incremental validity.

Investigations on the issue of incremental validity have been performed mainly in adult samples. These studies have robustly shown that trait EI, as assessed through the TEIQue, might be a valuable explanatory and incremental predictor of criteria such as life-satisfaction (Freudenthaler, Neubauer, Gabler, Scherl, & Rindermann, 2008), and academic achievement (Sanchez-Ruiz, Mavroveli, & Poullis, 2013) over and above the Big Five, perfectionistic concerns beyond Neuroticism (Smith, 2014), and cortisol secretion under pressure after controlling for the effects of age and anxiety (Laborde, Lautenbach, Allen, Herbert, & Achtzehn,

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2014). Even though few studies have explored this issue across samples of adolescents, their results are consistent with those obtained with adults (Davis & Humphrey, 2012; Mavroveli & Sanchez-Ruiz, 2011). In such investigations the short form of the TEIQue devoted to adolescents (TEIQue-ASF) was employed and the incremental validity analyses were focused on the global trait EI score, as was the case for studies run on adult populations. Despite this, those few studies focusing on the four factors of the adult TEIQue versions have shown that the incremental validity of trait EI derives mainly from the contribution of those facets associated with the factors Well-Being and Self-Control (e.g., Mikolajczak, Luminet, & Menil, 2006). In addition, a recent study employing the adult short form of the TEIQue suggests that the construct's predictive power may be altered by those facets loading onto the factors of Emotionality and Sociability domains (Siegling, Vesely, & Saklofske, 2013), thus suggesting that the current content domain of trait EI may still be too heterogeneous. To our knowledge investigations of this assumption have focused on adult populations only.

1.1. The present study

While there is little research on the incremental validity of the TEIQue across adolescence, to our knowledge there is no published investigations using the full adolescent form of the questionnaire, and focusing on the predictive contribution of the lower level components of the construct. In order to fill such gaps, the present study aimed at assessing the structure of the Italian TEIQue-AFF, as well as at examining its construct, criterion, and incremental validity. Consistently with the theoretical expectation of a predictive effect of trait EI over relevant affect-related criteria, and in line with relevance of the Big Five for psychological health (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006), internalizing symptoms, a construct generally referring to symptoms of depression and anxiety (Lonigan, Carey, & Finch, 1994), was selected as indicator of emotional maladjustment during adolescence.

Considering the contribution of each trait EI factor in the prediction of emotional maladjustment is an important step to ascertain which element of the construct may compromise the predictive power of trait EI at the global level. This evidence may ultimately provide further directions for a potential refinement of the construct, which in its current definition may not yet reflect the underlying emotion-related personality trait (Siegling et al., 2013). Moreover, showing whether and how trait EI predicts an incremental portion of variance at the lowest level of the construct (i.e., facet level) beyond the Big Five will provide a finer perspective on this issue. Thus, on the basis of the existing literature, it was hypothesized that:

H1: The 15 facets of the Italian TEIQue-AFF will show a four factor structure, thus replicating the one of the original English version of the questionnaire.

H2: Trait EI will be distinct from cognitive ability, while it will be associated with higher order personality traits, particularly with the factor Emotional Stability.

H3: Trait EI will show incremental validity at all construct levels over and above gender, cognitive ability and the Big Five dimensions. Significant incremental effects will be mainly due to the factors Well-Being and Self-Control.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 365 adolescents, recruited from secondary schools in major Italian cities. Pupils with special educational

needs ($n = 8$), and those ($n = 6$) who missed more than 15% of the items on the TEIQue-AFF were excluded from subsequent analyses. The final sample for the Factor Analysis was composed by 351 pupils (163 males), with age ranging from 14 to 18 ($M = 15.31$, $SD = 1.80$). Of these, a subsample of 174 (89 males, $M_{age} = 16.54$, $SD = 1.12$) participants completed additional measures for personality, IQ, depression and anxiety.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Trait EI

Trait EI was appraised through the Italian translation of the TEIQue-AFF (Petrides, 2009). The TEIQue-AFF comprises 153 brief statements responded to on a 7-point scale, ranging from completely disagree to completely agree. The TEIQue-AFF was developed on the full form of the adult TEIQue and is intended to yield scores on the same 15 facets and four factors. The items of the TEIQue-AFF were translated into Italian by one of the authors (Russo, P.M.) and then back-translated into English by an independent English-native speaker. Item order was preserved and the Italian TEIQue-AFF was pretested on a small group of subjects ($N = 30$) assessing comprehension and ease of answering

2.2.2. Personality

The Big Five Questionnaire-2 (BFQ-2; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni, & Vecchione, 2007) is aimed to assess the Big Five personality dimensions in adolescents and adults through 134 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Cronbach's reliability coefficients for the BFQ-2 scales were very good (.82 for Extraversion, .85 for Agreeableness, .83 for Conscientiousness, .90 for Emotional Stability, and .84 for Openness).

2.2.3. Cognitive ability

Raven's Standard Progressive Matrices (SPM; Raven, 2008) consist of a measure of pure non-verbal reasoning ability, comprising 60 items presented in five sets of 12 each, and providing a global IQ score.

2.2.4. Emotional maladjustment

The SAFA (Cianchetti & Sannio Fancello, 2001) is an Italian self-report instrument aimed to assess mental health conditions in children and adolescents aged from 8 to 18. The SAFA displayed satisfactory psychometric properties (Franzoni et al., 2009). For the purpose of the present study, a general index of internalizing symptoms was obtained by computing a mean score from the scales assessing depression and anxiety. The correlation between the two scale was .56 ($p < .01$)

2.3. Procedure

A letter explaining the aims and rationale of the study was sent to the headmasters and teachers in each school. Informed consent was obtained from parents/carers. After brief group explanations on the purpose of the activities, confidentiality, and the answer formats, participants filled out all measures in their classrooms.

2.4. Statistical analysis

The reliabilities of TEIQue-AFF were estimated using Cronbach's alpha, while Student's t test for independent samples was used for gender differences. Principal Axis Exploratory Factor Analysis was conducted on the 15 facets of the TEIQue-AFF. To determine the number of factors to retain, we combined Parallel Analysis (Horn, 1965), with Velicer's minimum average partial (MAP) test (Velicer, 1976), as suggested by O'Connor (2000). In the present study, Parallel Analysis was applied using the "Marley

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