Advancing the trait EI content domain: Further evidence for the distinctiveness of interpersonal facets

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ABSTRACT

This investigation sought to assess the congruence of the trait emotional intelligence (EI) sampling domain, reflected in the short form of the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue; Petrides & Furnham, 2006), with the theoretical content of trait EI—namely, the range of personality traits implicated in emotions. First, associations of the TEIQue factors with Emotion-Oriented Coping (EOC) and Social Coping (SC) were compared. Three of the four TEIQue factors were stronger predictors of EOC than SC; only the Emotionality factor was a stronger predictor of SC. Also, Emotionality did not add to the prediction of EOC in a simultaneous regression with the other factors. Secondly, by means of Structural Equation Modelling, the 30-item composite and a theoretically altered 16-item composite were compared as mediators between the Big Five and the emotion-laden dimension of mental health. Even though all interpersonal items (i.e., those pertaining to Sociability and Emotionality) were omitted for the altered composite, it outperformed the original composite in predicting a latent mental health composite of Stress, Anxiety, and EOC. The results highlight the distinct nature of Emotionality and Sociability facets and have implications for the refinement of the trait EI content domain.

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1. Introduction

Trait emotional intelligence (EI) theory provides a framework for interpreting the results of numerous self-report EI measures, as these assess enduring behavioural characteristics rather than cognitive abilities (Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Trait EI can also be considered a meta-concept linking various constructs theorized to be implicated in affect (e.g., self-esteem, optimism, Self-Control). A benchmark measure of trait EI is the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue; Petrides & Furnham, 2001), which was developed on the basis of the trait EI sampling domain to cover the emotion-related aspects of people's personalities at various ages (Petrides, Pérez-González, & Furnham, 2007). An issue that continues to be troublesome within EI research is deciding on what basis potential facets should be included or omitted. In theory, the operationalization of a construct ought to be preceded by delineating its conceptual boundaries. However, as personality and intelligence constructs are inferred from behaviour, it is difficult to "accurately" specify these boundaries at the outset. It is through the integration of relational (empirical) approaches with definitional (theoretical) approaches that the trait EI content domain can be established more objectively.

1.1. A critical look on the trait EI content domain

The sampling domain of trait EI outlined by Petrides is comprised of 15 facets (e.g., Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). This range of facets was established using content analysis and retaining only those facets that were frequent across other EI models and similar constructs (Petrides & Furnham, 2001). The use of content analysis virtually eliminated the possibility of inadvertently omitting facets commonly regarded as part of the EI content domain. More importantly, this approach increased the likelihood of generating an adequately large sampling domain to cover the spectrum of emotion-related traits—the theoretical content of trait EI. Remaining facets provided the basis for the TEIQue and items were developed to represent these facets. A subsequent factor analysis at the facet level gave rise to the TEIQue's four-factor solution: Well-Being, Self-Control, Emotionality, and Sociability. Overall, the TEIQue likely constitutes one of the most comprehensive operationalizations of trait EI.

A limitation associated with the content analysis approach, however, is the risk of incorporating facets that are less consistent with the theoretical trait EI domain. In particular, not all facets of other models may be part of the range of traits directly implicated in the experience of emotions. This potential incongruity is not always readily apparent; a facet may be emotional in content, yet conceptually and empirically more coherent with related

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constructs, thereby compromising the explanatory power and incremental validity of trait EI. As Petrides et al. (2007) indicated, the trait EI sampling domain is not final and will be further refined with theoretical and empirical advancements. On a theoretical level, it is apparent that a range of facets more directly related to social behaviour has crept into earlier EI models and, consequently, the trait EI sampling domain. Reflecting a person's behaviour in relation to other people, these facets may be more coherent with the content domain of trait social intelligence (Petrides, Mason, & Sevdalis, 2011).[1] Asking whether a facet directly influences people's affect, or individual differences therein (e.g., in contrast to social behaviour) may aid the refinement of trait EI scales from a theoretical angle.

A recent investigation into associations of the TEIQue factors with the Agency–Communion model of personality yielded preliminary empirical evidence that some of the trait EI facets primarily reflect social behaviour (Siegling, Saklofske, Vesely, & Nordstokke, 2012). Agentic personality traits (e.g., assertiveness, competitiveness) are focused on the self and autonomy, whereas communal traits (e.g., compassion, nurturance) signify affiliation with other people and a focus on building relationships (Bakan, 1966). Consistent with the intrapersonal nature of emotions, Agency was the stronger predictor of global trait EI, Well-Being, Self-Control, and Sociability than Communion, although both dimensions were significantly related to all subfactors. Associations of Communion with trait EI could reflect the conceptual link between social and emotional adjustment and, therefore, are not problematic as such. Yet, the Emotionality factor was more strongly associated with Communion, indicating that this factor and underlying facets are predominantly of an interpersonal nature. Further research is needed to isolate those components of the trait EI sampling domain that truly represent traits directly implicated in affect.

1.2. Assessing congruence with the theoretical trait EI domain

A general, empirical approach to assessing the trait EI sampling domain is to investigate the conceptual meaning of the TEIQue factors' associations with more established constructs (e.g., see Siegling et al., 2012). To assess aspects of the sampling domain specifically in relation to the theoretical content of trait EI (i.e., whether they reflect the range of personality traits implicated in emotions), it would be informative to compare the TEIQue factors' correlations with psychological adjustment criteria that differentiate more distinctly between emotions and social behaviour. In view of the aspired theoretical content, the TEIQue factors ought to be more strongly associated with the emotional aspects of adjustment rather than social functioning. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that associations between TEIQue factors and aspects of social adjustment can be expected, given the theoretical relation between emotional and social qualities.

Two indicators of emotional and social adjustment are Emotion-Oriented Coping (EOC) and Social Coping (SC), respectively (Endler & Parker, 1994). Consistent with Siegling et al.'s (2012) findings, different patterns of association of the TEIQue factors with these adjustment indicators can be expected: Emotionality may be a stronger predictor of SC, whereas the other three factors may be more predictive of EOC. Also, Emotionality facets describe how and to what extent individuals interact with close others emotionally (Petrides, 2009), which appears to be fundamental to SC, or the extent to which a person seeks the support of others in stressful situations (Endler & Parker, 1994). Sociability facets, although conceptually interpersonal as well, are reflective of a person's adaptive functioning in social contexts (Petrides, 2009). Emphasizing networking, social influence, and communication skills, Sociability is less fundamental to the more intimate SC, indicating a lack of association. By contrast, Sociability appears to be incompatible with EOC, indicating that these variables may correlate negatively.[2] Therefore, associations of the TEIQue factors with EOC and SC may only provide converging evidence for the interpersonal nature of the Emotionality factor.

Further insight into the sampling domain's congruence with the theoretical content of trait EI, including that of the Sociability factor, can be gained through mediation analysis. The emotion-related aspects of personality are theoretically implicated in mental health criteria with a pronounced emotional basis. Empirically, strong associations between trait EI and various mental health criteria have been demonstrated on numerous occasions (see Hansen, Lloyd, & Stough, 2009, for a review of relevant literature), and trait EI was also found to explain incremental variance in affect-laden criteria over general personality (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007; Saklofske, Austin, & Minski, 2003). As an umbrella construct of all affect-related traits, trait EI should also mediate a fair portion of the variance in mental health otherwise predicted by higher-order traits, such as the Big Five.[3] The mediating role of trait EI has only been demonstrated between higher-order traits and general health (e.g., Johnson, Batey, & Holdsworth, 2009; Saklofske, Galloway Austin, & Davidson, 2007). Research into the mediational effects of trait EI between personality and emotion-laden mental health criteria specifically (e.g., Saklofske, Austin, Mastoras, Beaton, & Osborne, 2012) will shed light on the adequacy of the present sampling domain. Facets that primarily reflect social, rather than emotional traits may compromise the mediational effects of trait EI in regards to emotion-laden mental health criteria, which are inherently intrapersonal.

1.3. Present study

This investigation seeks to assess the congruence of the trait EI sampling domain, represented by TEIQue–Short Form (SF), with its targeted theoretical content. First, associations of the TEIQue factors with EOC and SC will be compared. The discussed evidence and conceptual distinctions among trait EI factors lead to the following hypotheses:

> *H1a*: Self-Control, Well-Being, and Sociability will be stronger predictors of EOC than SC. *H1b:* Emotionality will be a stronger predictor of SC than of EOC. *H1c:* Emotionality will be the strongest predictor of SC, yet the weakest predictor of EOC, explaining no incremental variance over the other three factors.

Moreover, this study will compare two trait EI composites as mediators between the Big Five and mental health. Specifically, a latent composite of Anxiety, Stress, and EOC will be used to represent the emotion-laden dimension of mental health. The global composite of the TEIQue–SF (hereafter referred to as TEI) will be compared to a theoretically altered composite (TEI II) omitting all Emotionality and Sociability items. Although both composites can be expected to mediate the associations between the Big Five and mental health, some differences were hypothesized:

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[1] It must be remembered that, as Gignac (2009) has pointed out, no agreed-on empirical guidelines exist to determine whether a facet qualifies for a certain content domain, such as that of trait EI.

[2] It is important to recall that the focus of the labels "Sociability" and "Emotionality" should be on the underlying facets in order to appreciate the nature of these factors.

[3] Otherwise, the construct would fail to cover the spectrum of affect-related traits comprehensively. This idea illustrates the necessity for trait EI to share variance with the Big Five, which has been frequently noted as a point of criticism.