



# Romantic love: What's emotional intelligence (EI) got to do with it?

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## Abstract

The study examined the role of EI in romantic love among newlywed couples. In addition, we set out to assess to what degree outcomes depend on the specific EI measure employed, i.e., maximal performance (ability-based) vs. typical performance (self-report). In the dyadic design implemented in this research, 100 young heterosexual married couples independently completed the Mayer–Salovey–Caruso emotional intelligence test (MSCEIT), the Schutte self-report inventory (SSRI), and a vocabulary subtest of the MIL-TA group intelligence battery. EI, assessed via an ability and a self-report measure, showed significant ‘actor effects’, but failed to show significant ‘partner effects’, thus only partially supporting the hypothesis that EI predicts romantic love. Whereas ability-based and self-report measures show the same pattern of relationship with romantic love in dyadic assessments, the magnitudes of outcome relationships as well as the correlations of EI with verbal ability are measure-dependent. Marital partners were not correlated on EI, thus providing little evidence for assortative mating for EI.

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## 1. Introduction

Rapidly accelerating divorce rates in modern society raises the question: Why does an initially satisfying marriage deteriorate or remain stable over time? To answer this question, researchers have typically examined such individual difference variables as intelligence (Richardson, 1939; Watkins & Meredith, 1981), personality (Li, Yang, & Wei, 1998), and attitudinal dispositions (Feng & Baker, 1994; Luo & Klohnen, 2005). To date, research has paid only slight attention to the claimed pivotal role of emotional intelligence in romantic love, marital success, and perceived marital satisfaction. To fill a gap in the literature, the present research set out to shed light on the contribution of EI to perceptions of marital relationships, i.e., romantic love, in young married couples. We begin by briefly discussing the role of EI in social contexts and move on to discuss the role of EI in romantic love, the key outcome measure in this study.

### 1.1. *Emotional intelligence in social contexts*

In many ways, emotional intelligence may be considered as among the most promising of the ‘new constructs’ emerging in psychological science that are directed towards improving social adaptation (Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2002; Zeidner, Roberts, & Matthews, *in press*). Recently, social psychologists have heralded EI as a major factor determining adaptive interpersonal relationships (Fitness, 2001, 2006).

As a relatively new area of contemporary psychology, there are several disparate conceptions and models of EI. In navigating through the various EI models, it is useful to delineate two broad categories, distinguished both conceptually and in terms of measurement approaches: cognitive (ability) models and mixed (trait) models (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2000). Cognitive models conceptualize EI as strictly ability, whereas mixed models take a more inclusive approach, including dispositional, motivational, and situational variables under the rubric of EI. Differing conceptual approaches invariably spawn different measurement paradigms: cognitive models have favored the use of ‘maximal performance’ scales, whereas ‘mixed’ or ‘trait’ models generally rely on formats tailored to assess personality traits, consisting mainly of self-report scales of ‘typical performance.’ Thus, there are currently two basic varieties of measurement tools used to assess EI: (1) the maximum performance, ability scales; and (2) the typical performance, self-report, personality type scales. Despite the same label being attached to these two types of scales, corresponding scores are only weakly correlated (see Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, *in press*; Orchard et al., *in press*).

#### 1.1.1. *EI as a predictor of relationship outcomes*

It is commonly held that intimate interpersonal relationships, such as romantic or marital relations, tend to be both emotion-rich as well as high-conflict social contexts (Fitness, 2001). The very intimacy that links two people often lays the groundwork for both emotional highs and lows (Carstensen, Graff, Levenson, & Gottman, 1996). Thus, it has been claimed that emotionally intelligent couples may communicate more effectively, may handle conflicts effectively, and regulate their emotions better, thus facilitating adaptive solutions and outcomes (Fitness, 2001).

A number of recent studies, in fact, support the claim that EI may be important in marital relations. A study by Brackett, Warner, and Bosco (2005) found that couples who both scored high

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