



Relationship between emotional intelligence and aggression: A systematic review



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ABSTRACT

Emotional intelligence (EI), defined as a set of abilities for perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotions, has been associated with a better psychosocial adjustment. Empirical studies have found a positive relationship of EI with social function and a negative one with conflicts in social relationships. The purpose of this study was to systematically review available evidence on the relationship between EI and aggression. PubMed, PsycINFO and Scopus were searched for relevant articles in English and Spanish, and 19 eligible studies were identified. Together, these studies provide strong evidence that emotional abilities and aggressive behavior are negatively related: people with higher EI show less aggression. This relationship appears to be consistent across ages (from childhood to adulthood), cultures, types of aggression, and EI measures. Few studies have assessed EI using ability tests, and none of the eligible studies was longitudinal or experimental. These findings are discussed in relation to future research on aggression and strategies to prevent and manage it based on EI.

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1. Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (2002), each year more than 1.6 million people around the world die as a result of violent

behavior. In fact, violent behavior is one of the major causes of death for people aged 15–44. The prevalence and frequency of violent behavior around the world are far greater if we take into account violence that does not lead to death.

Human aggression is defined as any behavior directed toward another individual that is carried out with the *proximate* (immediate) intent to cause harm. In addition, the perpetrator must believe that the behavior will harm the target, and that the target is motivated to avoid the behavior (Anderson & Bushman, 2002).

Aggressive behavior produces negative effects not only in the victims, but also in the aggressors. More aggressive adolescents show clear psychosocial maladjustment, low academic performance, absenteeism from school, involvement in delinquent acts, substance abuse, and various mental health problems, including higher levels of depression (Moffitt, 2006; Ostrov & Godleski, 2009; Piquero, Daigle, Gibson, Piquero, & Tibbetts, 2007). The more aggressive adults are more likely than the less aggressive ones to exhibit psychiatric problems and criminal behavior as well as experience poor marital relations and unemployment (Alsaker & Olweus, 2002; Asberg, 1994; Coccaro, Noblett, & McCloskey, 2009; Farrington, 1991). Victims of aggression, for their part, suffer a myriad of negative consequences, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and stress effects such as headaches, difficulty in sleeping, and a desire to skip school in the case of children and adolescents (Cava, Buelga, Musitu, & Murgui, 2010; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001).

The strong influence of aggression on psychosocial adjustment and mental health outcomes highlights the importance of identifying variables that can increase or inhibit aggressive behavior. Knowledge of such variables is critical not only for understanding the mechanisms of aggression in greater detail, but also for designing effective programs for violence prevention and aggression management. Numerous studies have sought to understand processes that can affect aggression, including behavioral inhibition and control, empathy, and anger management (Barnett & Mann, 2013; Denson, Pedersen, Friese, Hahm, & Roberts, 2011; Pedersen et al., 2011; Van der Graaff, Branje, De Wied, & Meeus, 2012; Vasquez, Osman, & Wood, 2012; Wallace, Barry, Zeigler-Hill, & Green, 2012).

Among processes thought to influence aggressive behavior, emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged as a potentially relevant variable (Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004). Several studies have generated substantial evidence of an important association. However, each study by itself has analyzed only a small part of the overall association, either because of a relatively small sample size or because participants were limited to one age group or culture. In order to examine the field as comprehensively as possible, and provide reliable conclusions based on the largest sample sizes, we have performed a systematic review of studies that analyze the relationship between EI and aggression.

1.1. Emotional intelligence

EI is defined as “the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, p. 10). EI has been conceptualized primarily from two theoretical approaches: as a trait or as a mental ability. Trait EI, considered a personality trait, refers to the tendency or proclivity of a person to manage his or her emotions. Trait EI is usually measured using self-report instruments, such as the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue; Petrides, 2009), which asks the respondent to estimate the degree to which he or she possesses certain emotional abilities (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007).

In the second theoretical approach, EI is defined as a set of abilities that support the adaptive use of emotions as part of our cognitive processes. In other words, EI is genuinely considered a form of intelligence. Ability EI is usually assessed using performance test, such as the Mayer–

Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002). This instrument is a performance test because it requires individuals to solve tasks, and it is an objective test because there are better and worse answers on it, as determined by consensus or expert scoring (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000).

The EI theory predicts that people who are better at perceiving, understanding, using, and managing their own emotions and others' emotions are more likely to be psychosocially adjusted (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008). This prediction is well supported by empirical studies that demonstrate a positive relationship of EI with social function and quality of social relationships, and a negative relationship of EI with a number of negative interactions and conflicts in social relationships (Brackett et al., 2011).

1.2. Emotional intelligence and aggression

In light of the relationship between EI and variables related to social function, several authors have begun to investigate whether the inability to manage emotions is associated not only with conflict behaviors in relationships but also with more serious behavior problems such as aggressive conducts (Lomas, Stough, Hansen, & Downey, 2012). Some studies have investigated possible associations between EI and different manifestations of aggression (e.g., physical, verbal) in different contexts (e.g., in school, with a partner, during sex) (Moriarty, Stough, Tidmarsh, Eger, & Dennison, 2001; Siu, 2009).

The objective of the present work was to systematically review the literature on EI and aggression in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship across different theoretical conceptualizations of EI, different types of aggression, and different ages and cultural contexts. This should allow us to develop a clear picture of the current state of research and propose future lines of investigation to complement existing gaps in the field.

2. Method

MEDLINE, PsycINFO and Scopus databases were carefully searched over the period of 5–9, November 2012 for articles published in English or Spanish in scientific journals, without regard for the year of publication. Relevant articles were tagged when they contained “emotional intelligence” as a keyword or as a term in the title or abstract, together with one or more additional search terms. In PsycINFO, these additional terms were “aggressive behavior”, “aggressiveness”, and “behavior problems”; in MEDLINE, they were the MeSH terms “social behavior”, “aggression”, and “social problem”. Articles were also tagged if they contained, as keywords or in the title or abstract, a combination of the phrases “emotional intelligence” and one or more of the following terms: “aggress*”, “antisocial behavior”, “social behavior”, “behavior problem”, or “social problems”.

2.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The first criterion for inclusion in our systematic review was that it be an empirical study about the relationship between EI and aggression, leading us to exclude theoretical studies, reviews, and meta-analyses. Studies had to evaluate EI based on a model of EI as a set of specific, interrelated emotional abilities. This led us to exclude studies that relied on evaluation measures not grounded in EI theory, such as those that related aggression to emotional perception or regulation using instruments not grounded in an EI framework. We included studies even if they evaluated only one emotional competency, as long as they evaluated it within an EI framework.

Given the broad range of subtly different concepts understood under the term “aggression”, including aggressivity, violence, and bullying; and given the diversity of empirical approaches to analyze aggression, we decided to restrict ourselves to studies examining aggression as

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