

The emotionally intelligent ministry: why it matters

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Pizarro and Salovey hypothesise that religious systems are frequently “inherently emotionally intelligent” and that religious leaders may be experts in emotional regulation due to the inherent demands of their role. Despite such assertions, to date there appears to be little exploration of Emotional Intelligence (EI) amongst religious populations. Thus, suggesting that statements such as this may be based on supposition, speculation and stereotypes rather than grounded in sound empirical evidence. In an attempt to explore EI amongst religious systems, this study examined levels of EI amongst 226 Irish clergy. Participants completed the EI Scale. Results revealed that clergy levels of EI were lower than expected and below other diverse populations previously assessed using the same instrument. The emergence of such knowledge regarding clergy EI begins to suggest that religious systems may indeed not be conclaves of emotional abilities as previously assumed. Given the relevance and the potential value of employing EI abilities within the ministry, this result is both surprising and disconcerting.



Keywords: clergy; emotional intelligence; ministry; interpersonal relationships

Introduction

Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been hailed as potentially one of the most valuable personal and professional tools that an individual can possess and employ (Goleman, 1995). Over the past two decades researchers have explored the interplay of EI abilities within various personal and professional domains and outcomes. Results suggest that the deployment of EI skills may potentially result in positive enhancement within a wide range of social, emotional and professional encounters; EI amongst nursing staff (Heffernan, Griffin, McNulty, & Fitzpatrick, 2010; Vitello-Cirriu, 2001); hockey players (Perlini & Halverson, 2006), teachers (Chan, 2004); EI enhancing job satisfaction (Law, Wong, Huang, & Xiaoxuan, 2008; Lopez, Grewal, Kadis, Gall, & Salovey, 2006; Sy, Tram, & O’Hara, 2006); EI moderating impact of trauma (Hunt & Evans, 2004); EI and adaptive coping (Schmidt & Andrykowski, 2004); EI mediating burnout (Chan, 2006), and EI and stress reduction (Matthews, Emo, Funke, Zeidner, Roberts, Costa, & Schulz, 2006). The construct has also been explored amongst those who face challenging personal circumstances such as individuals living with HIV (Willard, 2006).

Yet despite the growing diversity of EI literature, those within religious vocations who encounter the demands of translating these vocations into occupational roles appear to have

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slipped somewhat under the radar of researchers, resulting in a unique and fascinating profession remaining immensely underexplored. **This lack of research interest is somewhat surprising given the diverse range of social and emotional interactions and stressors that clergy encounter.**

This paper suggests that amongst clergy, EI is a concept which merits exploration, as even at the most basic level there appear to be intuitive connections between the clergy role and the value of employing an emotionally intelligence ministry. Furthermore, in light of increasing numbers of clergy exiting ministerial life due to a number of role demands and related stressors, the consideration of EI as a resilience tool which could potentially decrease the numbers of early exits from the ministry through assisting clergy with the recognition and more positive management of some of these issues is pertinent.

Emotional intelligence

EI has been posited as involving “the ability to carry out accurate reasoning about emotions and the ability to use emotions and emotional knowledge to enhance thought” (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008, p. 507). The theoretical framework for EI began in the early 1990s with academics Salovey and Mayer (1990) proposing that individuals differ in their abilities to perceive, understand and use their emotional data. The suggestions emerged that those who accessed and employed this emotional knowledge potentially fared better within personal and professional encounters. However, without doubt it was the emergence of Goleman’s (1995) book *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ* which propelled the concept beyond academia and onto the wider world stage.

The relevance of EI has been embraced within the organisational arena due in part to Goleman’s (1995) suggestion that it is more important than IQ. This statement appeared to motivate organisations and individuals to pay attention to the potential benefits which EI could offer and as such the construct became an attractive professional enhancement tool (Kafetsios, Maridaki-Kassotaki, Zammuner, Zampetakis, & Vouzas, 2009). The benefits of employing EI skills have been positively associated with a range of situations and relationships encompassing; improved social relations for adults both in personal and professional settings (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006; Cotes & Miner, 2006; Elfenbein, Der Foo, White, Aik, & Tann, 2007; Lopes et al., 2004; Rubin, Munz, & Bommer, 2005); enhanced family and intimate relationships (Brackett, Warner, & Bosco, 2005; Carton, Kessler, & Pape, 1999); healthier psychological well-being (Bastian, Burns, & Nettleback, 2005; Gohm, Corser, & Dalsky, 2005; Matthews, Emo, Funke, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2006); superior leadership skills and team working (Jordan, Ashkanasy, Hartel, & Hooper, 2002; Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2001).

However, defining the construct of EI has at times proved troublesome and the growing range of conceptualisations which at times appear mixed with additional factors such as personality traits has done little to help clarity and give credence to the concept (Mayer et al., 2008). For some EI represents an eclectic mix of traits and dispositions and has been described as “an array of non-cognitive capabilities, competencies and skills that influence one’s ability to succeed in coping with environmental demands and pressures” (Bar-On, 1997, p. 14). Others present EI as “a constellation of behavioural dispositions and self-perceptions, concerning one’s ability to recognise, process and utilise emotion-laden information” (Petrides & Furnham, 2003, p. 278) and postulate that the concept represents social intelligence, encompassing empathy, assertiveness and impulsiveness. This multiplicity and ambiguity has led some to argue that EI is an invalid and unacceptable concept given the copious attempts to define it (Locke, 2005).

Psychologists have begun to recognise and accept the important role which emotions play in guiding both our thoughts and decision-making processes (Lowenstein, Weber, Hsee, & Welch, 2001). Salovey and Mayer (1990) set out to develop a coherent conceptualisation of EI grounded primarily within what constitutes an intelligence. Their conceptualisation stemmed from Thorndike's seminal work in the 1920s which searched for the elusive third intelligence. It also encompassed Gardner's (1983) concept of multiple intelligences. Salovey and Mayer drew together strands of these approaches and proposed a model of EI that involves one's ability to monitor one's own emotions and the emotions of others. This early model has since been refined and expanded and the emergent four branch ability model of EI encompasses a hierarchical approach of perceiving, using, understanding and managing emotion in order to enhance adaptive thought and actions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2002) define the four branches as follows:

- *Branch 1:* Perceiving emotions involves the ability to recognise emotions in ourselves and others via a variety of sources.
- *Branch 2:* Facilitating thought or using emotions. This ability is used to create feeling and emotions which one deems necessary for effective communication.
- *Branch 3:* Understanding emotions: Through this ability one can understand the "cause and effect" of emotions and how they evolve and develop.
- *Branch 4:* Managing emotions: Through employing this ability one is able to be open to affect, adjust and adapt one's emotions so promoting intrapersonal and interpersonal understanding and growth.

The assessment of this model of EI is carried out through The Mayer Salovey and Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer et al., 2002). This instrument was designed to assess EI through measuring how well an individual performs tasks and solves emotional problems. This is in contrast to answering subjective assessments of their self-perceived emotional skills which other self-report instruments employ (Mayer et al., 2002). Normative data for the MSCEIT are based upon a compilation of data from 5000 respondents. It uses both general and expert scoring and reports reliability of $r = .86$ ($n = 62$) and branch scores range from .74 to .89 (Mayer et al., 2002).

An additional assessment measure based upon Salovey and Mayer's (1990) EI model has also been developed. The Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS; Schutte et al., 1998) comprises a list of 33 self-report items. Factor analysis of 62 items based on the Salovey and Mayer (1990) model resulted in a single factor 33-item scale which its authors suggest measures a "homogeneous construct of emotional intelligence" (Schutte et al., 1998, p. 175).

Due to its brevity both to administer and score, and the fact it is free to access and administer, the scale remains a popular choice for researchers. In relation to the scale's suitability for use within a clergy population, Francis, Ryland, and Robbins (2011) carried out a factor analysis to address the issue of the internal consistency of the scale amongst a group of church leaders associated with the Newfrontiers network. In particular, item 14 in the scale, "I seek out activities that make me happy", was identified as failing to correlate with the sum of the other items. Francis et al. (2011) suggested that the poor performance by religious leaders in this item may be reflective of their reluctance to endorse self-seeking pleasure, gratification and indulgence. Several other items were also identified as having relatively low correlations, but Francis et al. (2011) argue that these low correlations may be due to the breadth of the concept of EI that the scale assesses.

Furthermore, they argued that the removal of these items could result in a narrowing of the concept examined by the scale and would be detrimental to comparisons with other studies that have employed the same instrument.

EI and the clergy

To date there have been a limited number of studies which have examined EI amongst religious populations. In the wider sphere [Tischler, Biberman, and McKeage \(2002\)](#) appraised literature on EI and aspects of spirituality and concluded that both constructs result in similar attitudes, actions and abilities. In support of this, [Paek \(2006\)](#) found that perceived EI was associated with attitudinal and behavioural measures of religiosity amongst a sample of 148 adults who attended church. Amongst a population of older Catholic nuns, EI was associated with spiritual transcendence ([Billard, Greer, Merrick, Sneek, & Sneers, 2005](#)).

Boyatzis, Brizz, and Godwin (2011) examined the impact of religious leaders' EI and social competencies (assessed in terms of empathy, transparency, self-confidence, inspirational leadership and influence) in relation to improving parishioners' satisfaction and support (measured in terms of donations and attendance).

Results indicated that religious leaders' EI was significantly related to parishioners' satisfaction but not their support. The authors suggest that an emotionally intelligent religious leader may be a benefit for parish life.

Interpersonal interactions are a core element of the clergy role with much of their work involving establishing good relationships with those they minister to ([Burton & Burton, 2009](#)). Given this contention it is hardly surprising that a number of doctoral studies have explored EI amongst clergy populations in relation to factors that may influence these relationships. Conflict in particular has been identified as a salient issue for clergy with clerics often required to have the ability to successfully manage situations of conflict where emotions may run high being viewed as a salient requirement ([Jenkins, 2002](#)). In juxtaposition to this EI has been identified as a positive factor for issues such as conflict management ([Day & Carroll, 2004](#)). [Muller and Curhan \(2006\)](#) reported that individuals with high EI scores in understanding emotions predicted how positively their negotiation partner would feel regarding a positive outcome ($r = .23$). [Gambill \(2008\)](#) investigated the influence of EI upon preferred clergy conflict management styles amongst a sample of US clergy. This study was undertaken due to the increased terminations amongst clergy as a result of conflict issues. [Gambill \(2008\)](#) hypothesised that clergy would have higher EI scores than the average population. Contrary to this hypothesis, results indicated that clergy in fact scored in the low average category for EI (as measured by the MSCEIT) with female clergy scoring higher than their male counterparts. The EI domains in which they fared best were emotional reasoning and managing emotions. The study also found no significant correlations between EI and a specific conflict management style.

[Oney \(2009\)](#) investigated clergy leadership effectiveness and EI amongst 136 senior pastors from the US Assemblies of God denomination. Effectiveness was assessed through performance variables of their local churches; Sunday morning attendance; water baptism; Holy Spirit Baptism and Sunday School attendance. EI was assessed via the Bar-On Emotional Quotient-Inventory ([Bar-On, 1997](#)). The only marginal predictive relationship was found between EI and conversions.

The clergy role also appears susceptible to the experience of burnout ([Croucher, 1991](#); [Kaldor & Bullpit, 2011](#); [Miner, 2007](#); [Sanford, 1982](#)). This is an increasingly prevalent issue for the clergy ([Doolittle, 2007](#)) with the subject attracting growing attention from empirical researchers. Studies offering insights into the negative impact on individual clerics, parishes and church structures ([Beebe, 2007](#), [Darling, Hill, & McWey, 2004](#); [Doolittle, 2007](#); [Francis, Wulff, & Robins, 2008](#); [Lewis, Turton, & Francis, 2007](#)). [Francis and Turton \(2004\)](#) examined a sample of 1468 Roman

Catholic priests, their findings reported that 36% felt “used up”, 20% reported feeling frustrated, 19% indicated they were “emotionally drained” and 14% indicated they were “burned out”.

A doctoral study by Pasler (2005) considered the influence of EI upon burnout amongst 101 clergy based in Virginia. EI was assessed using the MSCEIT (Mayer et al., 2002) and burnout via the modified Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Results indicated no significant associations between the two measures ($p = .057$) although the specific elements of MBI related to emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment were found to be associated.

To date there have been no published studies examining EI amongst Irish clergy and therefore the value of exploring EI amongst this population merits examination.

Method

Participants

The present study was carried out to examine levels of EI amongst a population of Irish serving clergy. This was only one element of a wider project exploring the secondary traumatisation experience of Irish clergy and the influence of EI within this experience. Participants consisted of 226 serving clergy within one of the four main denominations in Ireland who were located on both sides of the Irish border.

Instrument

The EIS (Schutte et al., 1998) was employed to assess EI. **This user-friendly scale** consists of 33 items that offer a self-report composite measurement of EI and is based upon the (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) Ability Model of EI (Schutte et al., 1998). The original scale initially comprised 62 items that were reduced to the current 33 by means of factor analysis conducted on a sample of 346 participants and the scale reports a coefficient of 0.90. Respondents are asked to rate themselves on various items using a five-point Likert scale; agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree and strongly disagree. Schutte, Malouff, and Bhullar (2009) suggest that an additional title for the scale is The Assessing Emotions Scale.

Data collection and analysis

The EIS (Schutte et al., 1998) was distributed as part of a larger research pack during June 2010 to 588 serving clergy within one of the four main denominations based in Northern and Southern Ireland. A total of 226 responses were received representing a response rate of 38.4%. The total sample of $N = 226$ comprised males, $N = 181$ (80.1%) and females, $N = 45$ (19.9%).

As directed by the instrument’s authors, it was manually scored with scores on items 5, 28 and 33 being reverse scored. Items were then summed and a total score ranging from 33 to 165 was produced with higher scores indicating higher self-report EI. Analysis of the data was undertaken using SPSS 18.

Results

The EI mean reported was 120.19 (SD 13.24). An independent t -test revealed a significant difference in EI scores between the genders $F = 2.956$, $p = .007$ (males 119.01, SD = 13.24 and females 124.91, SD = 10.26).

Discussion

Pizarro and Salovey (2002) hypothesise that religious systems are frequently “inherently emotionally intelligent” and that religious leaders may be experts in emotional regulation due to the inherent demands of their role (p. 221). The current results suggest that despite these prior assertions, religious leaders may in fact not necessarily report high levels of emotional ability.

The most significant result emerging is that levels of clergy EI appears to be somewhat low. Although no recognised normative cut-off points exist which indicate high or low levels of EI for this instrument, the mean scores published by the instrument’s devisors do provide a useful point of reference. Schutte et al. (1998) reported the EI means for the sample within their validation study as the following: therapists 134.92 (SD = 20.25); prisoners 120.08 (SD = 17.71) and clients in a substance abuse programme 122.23 (SD = 14.08). Therefore, when comparisons are carried out between the current EI means and those reported by Schutte et al. (1998) then the current clergy appear to report lower EI than the other professional groups consisting of therapists and lower EI than the groups comprising prisoners. In fact clergy EI scores appear to be more on a par with those reported by the participants in substance abuse programmes.

When the current results are also considered in light of EI levels reported amongst other religious populations then there does appear to be more complementation. Francis et al. (2011) did not report a mean for their total sample; however, comparison of the score for each gender provides valuable insights. Francis et al. (2011) reported EI levels for male as 116.62, females 120.41 with the current study reporting males 119.01, females 124.91. Additionally, Gambill (2008) reported clergy scored in the low average category for EI. Gambill (2008) employed the MSCEIT to assess EI and therefore the comparison of results suggests that clergy report low EI scores across more than a single EI instrument. These comparisons also suggest that clergy EI is low across a number of denominational and geographical settings.

It is also valuable to compare the current results with studies assessing EI using the same instrument but amongst other population groups. Schutte et al. (2009) reported a wide array of studies that have employed the same measurement tool.

- Polish human service professionals EI 123.58, SD 15.15 (Oginska-Bulik, 2005).
- US retail employees EI 130, SD 14.99 (Schutte, Malouff, Simunek, Hollander, & McKenley, 2002).
- US community members and students EI 131.56, SD 15.67 (Schutte et al., 2001).
- US teaching interns EI 142.51, SD 9.46 (Schutte et al., 2001).

Limitations and implications for further research

The present study had several limitations. First only one EI self-report assessment instrument was employed. Given that EI is a diverse construct that can be assessed via a number of different instruments, then the employment of further EI instruments within the same sample would be beneficial. This could illuminate if the self-report EIS was in fact measuring the construct of EI and not merely reporting the need for social compatibility and conformity. However, given the low EI mean recorded in the current study this does not appear to be a particularly salient issue.

Second, whilst the sample was relatively large ($N = 226$) it did consist of only one denominational representation of Irish Christian clergy. What is now required is for further studies to examine the concept of EI amongst other religious orientations and geographical locations.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that those who are involved in the clergy role may in fact have difficulty in recognising, understanding and using emotional information. Given that the clergy role involves interpersonal relationships between those who offer pastoral care and those who received it, which naturally involves high amounts of emotional data, then the lack of EI abilities employed may result in less than satisfactory encounters for both parties. It also has been identified that the clergy role is capable of producing conflict, stress and eventually burnout. When this is considered, then once again clergy may be finding such experiences more difficult due to the emotional data of themselves and others not being recognised and used in the most positive way. The low levels of clergy EI direct attention to the potential benefits of exposing clergy to training in EI skills in an attempt to enhance the ministerial experience for all involved.

Following on from this, exploration of why EI is so low amongst the clergy profession is also pertinent. Further investigation is needed to understand if the ministry attracts those who are innately low in EI, or if there are specific elements of the clergy role that over time erode levels of EI. The future of EI research within the clergy domain may potentially be both bountiful and fruitful for researcher and clergy alike. Further research is needed to explore the links between EI and the specific elements associated with the clergy role in an attempt to enhance both the ministerial experience for those who undertake its challenges and for those who fall under its care.

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