

## Comment: Trait EI Moderates the Relationship Between Ability EI and Emotion Regulation

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### Abstract

Mestre, MacCann, Guil, and Roberts (2016) propose a model that suggests emotion regulation provides the mechanism through which ability emotional intelligence influences important outcomes. We argue that important nuance in our understanding of people's choice of emotion regulation strategy can be gained by incorporating personality constructs such as trait emotional intelligence within this model.

### Keywords

emotion regulation, emotional intelligence, personality, trait emotional intelligence

Mestre et al. (2016) suggest integrating emotional intelligence (EI) abilities with well-established models of cognitive ability and emotion. We applaud their efforts, which represent worthwhile avenues of future research. In this commentary, we consider their suggestion that emotion regulation (ER) is the likely process by which ability EI produces positive outcomes. Specifically, we argue that personality constructs such as trait EI are a part of this process and thus including them within models of this process will provide important nuance in our understanding of ER.

Ability EI correlates positively with the use of some ER strategies (e.g., positive reappraisal) and negatively with others (e.g., avoidance; Peña-Sarrionandia, Mikolajczak, & Gross, 2015). However, this is not the full picture. Individuals with similar levels of ability EI sometimes choose to adopt different ER strategies, some of which do not produce positive or socially desirable outcomes (Côté, DeCelles, McCarthy, Kleef, & Hideg, 2011).

We hypothesise that trait EI, a compound construct representing emotion-related personality traits (Petrides, Furnham, & Mavroveli, 2007), is an important determinant of the choice of ER strategy. Personality traits (e.g., trait EI) shape individual preferences, attentional focus, interpersonal behaviour, and motives, all of which are likely to influence the choice of ER

strategy (e.g., Côté et al., 2011). Thus, incorporating trait EI as a moderator of the relationship between ability EI and ER might provide greater nuance in our understanding of emotion-related behaviour. For example, ability EI shares a modest, positive correlation with use of positive interpretations as a cognitive ER strategy (Peña-Sarrionandia et al., 2015). It is conceivable that two individuals equally high in ability EI with differing levels of trait optimism (a facet of trait EI; Petrides et al., 2007) might differ in their frequency of positive interpretations.

Further, Mestre et al. (2016) focus on ER of the self, yet recent ER models now incorporate the regulation of others' emotions, too (Niven, Totterdell, Stride, & Holman, 2011). We hypothesise that the moderating effect of personality constructs such as trait EI will be particularly pronounced when we examine the regulation of others' emotions. As noted before, personality traits shape attentional focus and goals: Some traits drive outwardly focussed attention and goals whilst others provide an inward focus. Individuals with high levels of outward focus are motivated to place others' needs above their own (Grant & Mayer, 2009). Many aspects of trait EI (e.g., empathy, social awareness) drive an outward focus aimed at appeasing or pleasing others, which might be particularly influential when attempting to regulate others' emotions. For example, use of venting for ER correlates positively with ability EI but negatively with trait

EI (Peña-Sarrionandia et al., 2015). It is likely that venting (e.g., berating a manager to a colleague) is a productive strategy for regulating one's own emotions but is less useful, perhaps even counterproductive, for the regulation of others' emotions (e.g., increasing colleague stress) and could produce negative outcomes (e.g., create negative reputation, undermine manager, demotivate colleague). Thus, a person high in both ability EI and trait EI might recognise that venting is useful for themselves but not others and may (temporarily at least) suppress their venting.

Similarly, humour is an interpersonal communication device that can be used for ER (Evans & Steptoe-Warren, 2015). Peña-Sarrionandia et al. (2015) report a negligible correlation between ability EI and the use of humour for ER. Conversely, trait EI correlates positively with adaptive humour use (e.g., affiliative) and negatively with maladaptive humour use (e.g., aggressive). The negligible correlation between ability EI and humour as an ER strategy could represent no relationship or a moderated relationship. Those high in both ability EI and trait EI might use adaptive humour often whereas those high in ability EI but low in trait EI might use it less. Equally, those low in both ability EI and trait EI might use maladaptive humour more often than those high in ability EI but low in trait EI.

In sum, we endorse the integrative approach proposed by Mestre et al. (2016) and call for researchers to incorporate personality constructs, too. Specifically, we call for the empirical examination of the hypothesised moderating role of trait EI within the ability EI → ER → outcome process. Within such studies, we suggest that the examination of theoretically salient trait EI facets rather than global trait EI alone will prove particularly fruitful (c.f. Hughes & Batey, in press).

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