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Trait emotional intelligence and decision-related emotions

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Abstract

Although substantial empirical research has emphasized the relevance of emotions in decision-making processes, individual differences in the perception and experience of emotion have been largely overlooked. Here we report research that examines the relationship between trait emotional intelligence (*trait EI* or *trait emotional self-efficacy*) and decision-related affect. In Study 1, we obtained a positive relationship between trait EI and the deterioration of mood after the recall of a poor real-life decision. In Study 2, we obtained a negative relationship between trait EI and negative emotions experienced a few days after a failed negotiation. In addition, trait EI was positively associated with affective overprediction. The findings are discussed with reference to behavioural decision research and the need to explore the role of individual differences in this research.

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Keywords: Regret; Disappointment; Mood; Trait emotional intelligence; Trait emotional self-efficacy; Affective self-prediction; TEIQue

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1. Trait emotional intelligence and decision-related emotions

When people make decisions, they often think about the emotions that the outcomes of their decisions are likely to trigger. Decision-makers anticipate their emotions before a decision materialises, they experience them when they receive the outcome of their decisions, and they recall them from memory when they contemplate past decisions (good or poor). Evidence from behavioural decision research suggests that the emotions people expect to experience in the future, or those that they have experienced in the past as a consequence of their decisions, are important determinants of their behaviour (Mellers, Schwartz, & Ritov, 1999).

Research from the individual differences tradition suggests that people differ in systematic ways in how they experience emotions, how able they are to differentiate between them, and how much emotional information they can process (Winter & Kuiper, 1997). However, individual differences in the way people manage their decision-emotions have traditionally been neglected by behavioural decision researchers.

Assessing individual differences in the management of decision-related emotions requires the utilisation of a construct that operationalizes emotion-related individual differences successfully and comprehensively. Such an operationalization is provided by the construct of trait emotional intelligence (*trait EI* or *trait emotional self-efficacy*), which comprises a constellation of emotion-related self-perceptions and dispositions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies (Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Unlike other EI approaches, trait EI theory does not view the construct as necessarily adaptive or desirable. For example, Petrides and Furnham (2003) found that high trait EI participants showed greater mood deterioration than their low trait EI peers following exposure to distressing stimuli. This is a tenet that makes trait EI theory particularly suitable as an explanatory framework for our purposes.

Other studies that have examined the relationship between EI-related questionnaires and mood include Ciarrochi, Chan, and Bajgar (2001) and Schutte, Malouff, Simunek, McKenley, and Holland (2002). These will now be discussed from the perspective of trait EI theory, which may contradict the hypotheses and interpretations of the original studies. Interested readers are encouraged to read the original sources. For a discussion of trait EI theory and how it differs from the other approaches to emotional intelligence, see Petrides, Furnham, and Mavroveli (in press).

Schutte et al. (2002) measured positive affect (PA) before and after a negative mood induction through Velten (1968) procedure. They found a positive correlation between trait EI and reduction in PA levels, which they interpreted as evidence that “emotionally intelligent” individuals are better at regulating their mood. However, two ambiguities render this conclusion premature. First, the appropriate dependent variable in this case was negative, not positive, affect. It is unclear why, instead of examining the effects of negative mood induction on negative affect (NA) change, the study focused exclusively on the (conceptually and empirically independent in the PANAS system) positive component of mood. The second point is that even if a robust effect on NA had been demonstrated through the Velten procedure, it would lend little credence to the notion that “emotional intelligence” is a desirable mental ability. Such a conclusion would have required us to believe that “emotionally intelligent” participants, in a matter of a few minutes, not only read, understood, and genuinely experienced the negative mood states as required by the Velten method, but that they also found the time to regulate them adaptively, a highly unlikely possibility.

Ciarrochi et al. (2001) study is arguably more illuminating, although somewhat more complicated too. They induced negative, neutral, and positive mood through video clips and subsequently asked participants to look at an ambiguous picture, to generate a short story based on it, and to report how they felt. Their analysis focused on a specific factor of trait EI (viz., emotion regulation), which means the results do not necessarily generalize to the global construct. Among other things, Ciarrochi et al. found that the group with high emotion regulation scores was more likely than the group with low scores to generate positive short stories (as rated by independent judges). However, when the mood ratings of the two groups, which were obtained after the generation of the stories, were compared, they were not significantly different. Moreover, the study found that, in the neutral condition, participants with high scores on emotion regulation were more likely to generate negative stories compared to their peers with low scores.

Our interpretation of existing studies is that they are far indeed from supporting the notion that “emotional intelligence” is anything to do with desirable mental abilities, or competencies, or skills. Instead, these studies are generally compatible with the conceptualization of emotional intelligence as a personality trait, one of whose tenets is that there are situations in which high scores will be associated with maladaptive outcomes (Petrides and Furnham, 2003; Petrides, Furnham, & Mavroveli, in press a). This is a possibility we examine in this paper.

The research that we report here extends experimental investigations of trait EI to the domain of decision-related emotions. In Study 1, we tested the hypothesis that trait EI is associated with reactivity to decision-related emotional information. In Study 2, we tested the hypothesis that trait EI is associated with more effective management of negative post-decisional emotions.

2. Study 1

Participants recalled a real-life decision that resulted in a poor outcome. Before and after recalling the decision, participants recorded their mood. We expected that mood levels would deteriorate as a result of recalling the poor decision and, more important, that mood deterioration would correlate positively with trait EI scores (hypothesis H_1). As noted, the hypothesis contradicts a popular view that EI is always adaptive. Trait EI theory explicitly rejects models that view the construct as a mental ability or competency or skill and instead reconceptualizes the construct as a constellation of emotion-related self-perceptions (i.e., a personality trait) that cannot be assumed to have adaptive value irrespective of circumstance and context (Petrides et al., in press a).

There exist, therefore, instances where higher trait EI is associated with maladaptive outcomes (for example, increased susceptibility to negative mood induction). High trait EI individuals may be more attuned to affect-laden stimuli than their low trait EI peers and, consequently, more likely to experience mood deterioration immediately after exposure to distressing stimuli (affect sensitivity hypothesis— H_1). While, over time, high trait EI may be conducive to mood regulation, in the present experimental design participants were asked to describe their mood immediately after the induction, which does not allow sufficient time to regulate it.

In addition, we expected that trait EI scores would correlate positively with baseline PA (H_{2a}) and negatively with baseline NA (H_{2b}). Due to the well-being component of the construct, we

would expect high trait EI individuals to experience more positive and less negative affect, on average. More generally, in the context of hierarchical structures of affect (Tellegen, Watson, & Clark, 1999) trait EI would be expected to correlate positively with positive affectivity and negatively with negative affectivity and to exhibit a strong positive association with the trait pleasantness–unpleasantness (or happiness–unhappiness) dimension at the apex of the hierarchy.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Sixty unpaid students at the University of London volunteered to participate (mean age = 25.24 years, SD = 9.69 years; 43 females, gender data missing for one participant).

3.2. Materials and procedure

Participants were given a short questionnaire containing the experimental instructions and measures of affect and trait EI. First, they recorded their current mood using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The PA scale consists of the items: attentive, interested, alert, excited, enthusiastic, inspired, proud, determined strong, and active. The NA scale consists of the items: distressed, upset, guilty, scared, hostile, irritable, ashamed, nervous, jittery, and afraid. All items are answered on five-point scales (1 = slightly or not at all; 5 = very much). The PANAS assesses the activation of positively and negatively valenced emotions. Its reliability and construct validity have been demonstrated in a number of studies (Crawford & Henry, 2004; Crocker, 1997; Watson et al., 1988) and the scale has been extensively used in research with normal and clinical samples.

Next, participants were instructed to recall, and describe in writing, a decision that led them to experience intense negative affect. When they were finished, they completed the PA and NA scales again.

Finally, participants completed the short form of the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue-SF; Petrides & Furnham, 2006). The TEIQue-SF was designed as a measure of global trait EI, although it is also possible to derive from it scores on the four trait EI factors ('emotionality,' 'sociability,' 'self-control,' and 'well-being'). Its internal consistency is invariably high (>.80) and validity evidence can be found in Petrides and Furnham (2006). As regards its overlap with the higher-order personality dimensions, although we are not aware of any relevant analyses, we would expect it to be similar to that of the long form of the inventory, viz., about 70% (Petrides et al., in press a).

In relation to incremental validity, trait EI can account for variance over and above the basic personality factors (for a detailed discussion and empirical demonstration, see Petrides, Pérez-González, & Furnham, in press). Specifically with respect to the incremental validity of the TEIQue-SF, Furnham and Petrides (2003) found that, while it could account for happiness variance over and above the NEO-FFI, the latter (as a block of variables) did not have a statistically significant effect in the presence of the former.

4. Results and discussion

The mean trait EI score was 146.97 (SD = 18.94; median = 146) and the α was .83. The PANAS scales also exhibited satisfactory internal consistency (average α of the two administrations: PA = .90 and NA = .87).

In order to investigate the relationship between trait EI and emotional reactivity to the decision recall task, we subtracted the PA (NA) scores before the recall task from PA (NA) scores after the task. This algebraic manipulation resulted in a reactivity index for PA (NA), on which positive scores indicate increases in positive (negative) affect.

The first two grand columns of Table 1 summarise PA and NA scores across the two mood assessments. Participants' mood deteriorated after they recalled their poor decision, leading to lower PA ($t(59) = 3.62, p < .01$) and higher NA ($t(59) = 3.58, p < .01$) after the recall. The third grand column of Table 1 summarises the two reactivity indices. The index is negative for PA, indicating a decrease, and positive for NA, indicating an increase.

Table 2 summarises the intercorrelations of the variables in the study. Of particular interest here is the first column, which shows the correlations between trait EI, PA and NA (before and after the decision recall) and the two reactivity indices. As hypothesized, trait EI correlated negatively with the reactivity index for PA and positively with the reactivity index for NA. In high trait EI scorers, PA decreased more and NA increased more after recalling a past decision that led to intense negative affect, which supports H_1 . Table 2 also shows that trait EI correlated positively with baseline PA and negatively with baseline NA, which supports H_{2a} and H_{2b} .

The relationship between trait EI and the two reactivity indices may be affected by a statistical artefact. Specifically, it could be argued that the resulting correlations are partly due to the higher baseline positive (and lower baseline negative) affect of high trait EI participants compared to their

Table 1
Means and SDs for key variables in Study 1

	Before decision recall		After decision recall		Reactivity index	
	<i>M</i>	SD	<i>M</i>	SD	<i>M</i>	SD
Positive affect	27.06	8.28	24.05	8.18	-3.01	6.45
Negative affect	15.28	6.01	17.83	6.41	2.55	5.52

Table 2
Pearson correlations for key variables in Study 1

	Trait EI	PA before	PA after	NA before	NA after	Reactivity PA	Reactivity NA
Trait EI	–						
PA before	.29 ^a						
PA after	.05	.69 ^b	–				
NA before	-.41 ^b	.15	.27 ^a	–			
NA after	-.12	.18	.10	.61 ^b	–		
Reactivity PA	-.30 ^a	-.41 ^b	.38 ^b	.14	-.10	–	
Reactivity NA	.32 ^a	.04	-.18	-.39 ^b	.50 ^b	-.28 ^a	–

^a $p < .05$.

^b $p < .01$; $N = 60$.

low trait EI peers, since, in the former, PA drops from higher and NA rises from lower than in the latter. However, this argument is conceptually problematic because high trait EI is associated with better baseline mood *prior to any experimental manipulation* (see H_2 ; Petrides and Furnham, 2003; Petrides et al., *in press a*). We tested the hypothesis that high trait EI participants will exhibit greater mood deterioration than their low trait EI peers, *irrespective of the underlying mechanism*, which may well involve them coming down from a higher mood level. Furthermore and relatedly, we did not seek to demonstrate that the relationship between trait EI and mood change is incremental over prior mood. What our study shows is that trait EI is a positive predictor of mood deterioration, following exposure to negative mood induction. Whether it remains so after higher-order personality traits or prior mood are partialled out is an altogether different question and one of little theoretical importance in trait EI theory (for a discussion of this issue and relevant empirical demonstrations, see Petrides & Furnham, 2003; Petrides, Pérez-González, & Furnham, *in press b*).

Although in Study 1 we used a real-life decision in the experimental design, we did not examine participants' decisions as they unfolded. Consequently, we were only able to observe the impact of a past poor decision on current mood. In Study 2, we set out to investigate the relationship between trait EI and decision-related affect in a decision that unfolded during the course of the experiment.

5. Study 2

Participants negotiated for money and were asked to predict how they would feel immediately after the negotiation as well as five days later (both in case they succeeded and in case they failed). As part of the experimental procedure, all negotiations failed. Participants recorded their regret and disappointment immediately after the negotiation and also five days later. (The study was part of a larger experimental session, the details of which we report in Sevdalis & Harvey, *submitted for publication*.)

Based on existing evidence that people typically overstate their affective self-predictions (Loewenstein & Schkade, 1999), we expected that, overall, participants would give exaggerated predictions of their negative emotions immediately after the negotiation as well as five days later (H_1). However, we were also interested to explore whether the extent of overprediction varies as a function of trait EI.

In addition, we expected that trait EI would correlate negatively with regret and disappointment measured both immediately after the failure of the negotiation (H_{2a}) as well as five days later (H_{2b}). These hypotheses stem from the assumption that, due to their positive self-perceptions, high trait EI individuals should be more resilient to stress and failure. Note that this hypothesis is unrelated to the affect sensitivity hypothesis we tested in Study 1, since it concerns resilience to an experienced failure, rather than sensitivity to emotional information.

6. Method

6.1. Participants

Twenty-four individuals volunteered for the study (mean age = 22.21 years; SD = 2.81 years; 14 females) and were compensated for their time.

6.2. Materials and procedure

Participants were given a short booklet containing the instructions for the negotiation task and the measures of affect and trait EI. The study ran in five stages.

In the first stage, participants received the instructions. We used the *ultimatum game* as the negotiation paradigm. In the simplest form of an ultimatum game (Güth, Schmittberger, & Schwarz, 1982), a *proposer* receives money from the experimenter, which she then has to share with a *responder*. The only exchange between the negotiators involves the offer that the proposer makes to the responder. If the offer is accepted, the negotiators share the money according to the offer. If it is rejected, neither receives any amount. In this study, all participants were assigned the role of the proposer and were told they would negotiate with a responder, who was in a different room.

In the second stage, participants predicted their post-negotiation regret and disappointment for immediately after the task and for a week later. These two emotions are commonly used to assess decision-related affect. Participants recorded their responses on five-point scales (1 = slightly or not at all; 5 = very much). Since participants did not know at this stage the outcome of their offers, they predicted their emotions under scenarios of both success and failure. Therefore, we obtained affective predictions for two outcome contingencies (success versus failure) and two time perspectives (immediately versus a week later).

In the third stage, participants completed the TEIQue-SF.

In the fourth stage, participants received the outcomes of the negotiation. All offers were rejected. After receiving this information, participants recorded their actual regret and disappointment.

In the final stage of the study, participants returned to the laboratory five days later and reported their regret and disappointment again.

7. Results and discussion

The mean trait EI score was 149.85 (SD = 19.13; median = 156.50) and the α was .86. Consistent with existing research on ultimatum negotiation, participants offered an average of £4.67 (SD = £0.92; median = £5) out of the £10 allocated to them by the experimenter. Eighteen out of the 24 participants made offers of £5 or more.

Table 3 summarises the average regret and disappointment predicted and experienced immediately after the negotiation as well as five days later. Table 4 shows the correlations between trait EI and affective predictions and experiences. As can be seen in that table, the correlations between

Table 3
Means and SDs for the affective predictions and experiences in Study 2

	Predictions				Experiences			
	Regret		Disappointment		Regret		Disappointment	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Immediately	2.25	1.26	3.79	0.78	1.54	0.93	2.88	1.03
Five days later	1.87	0.97	2.39	0.89	1.61	0.66	1.78	0.85

Table 4
Pearson correlations for key variables in Study 2

Time		Trait EI	Predictions				Experiences			
			Immediate		5 days later		Immediate		5 days later	
			Regret	Disappointment	Regret	Disappointment	Regret	Disappointment	Regret	Disappointment
Predictions	Immediate	Regret	-.13	–						
		Disappointment	.00	.23	–					
	5 days later	Regret	.03	.83 ^b	.08	–				
Disappointment		-.44 ^a	-.29	.44 ^a	-.15	–				
Experiences	Immediate	Regret	-.22	.32	.16	.08	-.42 ^a	–		
		Disappointment	.03	.09	.45 ^a	-.02	.25	.07	–	
	5 days later	Regret	-.62 ^b	.16	.35	-.08	-.27	.56 ^b	.03	–
		Disappointment	-.49 ^a	-.04	-.14	-.20	-.18	.26	.32	.49 ^a

^a $p < .05$.

^b $p < .01$; $N = 23$ – 24 .

trait EI and immediate affect did not reach significance, thus failing to support H_{2a} . In contrast, the correlations with regret and disappointment experienced five days after the negotiation were both significantly negative, thus supporting H_{2b} .

Next, we calculated prediction error indices for regret and disappointment by subtracting affective predictions from experiences (both for immediate judgments and for judgments made five days later). Negative signs on these indices indicate overprediction (prediction > experience), whereas positive signs indicate underprediction (prediction < experience). We submitted the error indices to one-sample *t*-tests against a test value of zero, which indicates perfectly accurate predictions (prediction = experience). As hypothesised, we obtained significant overpredictions for regret ($M = -0.71$, $SD = 1.30$; $t(23) = 2.67$, $p < .05$) and disappointment ($M = -0.92$, $SD = 0.97$; $t(23) = 4.61$, $p < .001$) experienced immediately after the negotiation. As regards judgments made five days after the negotiation, the results were consistent for disappointment ($M = -0.61$, $SD = 1.34$; $t(22) = 2.18$, $p < .05$), but not for regret, which did not reach significance ($M = -0.26$, $SD = 1.21$; $t(22) = 1.03$, $p = .31$). These findings provide support for hypothesis H_1 .

Trait EI was negatively correlated with the prediction error indices for disappointment ($r = -.61$, $p < .01$) and regret ($r = -.36$, $p < .05$, one-tailed) five days after the failed negotiation. That is to say, high trait EI participants showed greater discrepancies between predicted and experienced affect than their low trait EI peers a week after the failed negotiation. In contrast, there was no association between trait EI and affective prediction errors immediately after the negotiation.

To summarize, Study 2 provided empirical support for two out of the three hypotheses. Participants overpredicted their regret and disappointment immediately after the unsuccessful negotiation and their disappointment five days later (H_1). Trait emotional self-efficacy qualified this finding, however, with high trait EI participants, more so than their low trait EI counterparts, overpredicting the regret and disappointment that they experienced five days after the failed negotiation. High trait EI participants also felt better overall than their low trait EI peers five days after the failed negotiation (H_{2b}). An important advantage of the study is that the results were obtained through a realistic two-person negotiation in which participants were financially motivated to perform well as in real-life decision-making.

Study 2 did not find a relationship between trait EI and participants' affect immediately after the negotiation, thus failing to support H_{2a} . As further discussed below, the experimental literature on trait EI is still at an early stage and it is not yet clear which effects are robust nor do we know much about the processes underlying the various significant effects. In general, we would expect that high trait EI individuals will show greater resilience to stress and failure, an expectation that has been confirmed in several studies (see Mikolajczak, Petrides, Luminet, & Coumans, submitted for publication). It should be reiterated here that the resilience hypothesis is different from the affect sensitivity hypothesis we tested in Study 1.

There is a pressing need for more experimental studies to elucidate the nature and extent of trait EI effects as well as the circumstances under which they become salient. At the same time, it will be important to vary systematically the research designs and criteria in order to accumulate evidence that can inform theory. At present, there are far too many different designs and dependent variables to be able to draw firm conclusions. In the case at hand, the lack of support for H_{2a} could be a function of using highly specific criteria (regret and disappointment) or of measuring them through a single item, or of a weak experimental stimulus. In relation to specificity, whereas in

Study 1 we focused on general affective states (i.e., general mood), in Study 2 we assessed *decision-specific* reactions (i.e., regret and disappointment), which is another reason why the two studies may not be directly comparable (see also Connolly, Ordóñez, & Coughlan, 1997).

8. General discussion

This paper documents influences of trait EI on decision-related emotions. In Study 1, trait EI was associated with mood deterioration following the recall of a poor prior decision. In Study 2, it was associated with larger overpredictions of post-decisional emotions and with a more positive emotional state five days after receiving a poor decision outcome.

Although these findings must be replicated in larger samples, they suggest that individual differences in trait emotional self-efficacy influence the anticipation and experience of post-decisional affect. Behavioural decision research has traditionally endeavoured to map a variety of environmental (i.e., external to the decision-maker) influences on decisions. For instance, it has been shown that anticipated regret is exacerbated when people expect to receive feedback on the outcome of alternatives they did not choose (Zeelenberg, 1999) and that experienced regret is more intense for decision-makers who are personally responsible for their decisions than for those who are not (Zeelenberg, van der Pligt, & de Vries, 2000).

Our research suggests that the above findings may require qualifications. Personal (i.e., internal to the decision-maker) factors might be at work when people contemplate possible routes of action. For instance, consistent with the existing literature, in Study 2 we found that post-decisional negative emotions were overpredicted. However, high trait EI participants overpredicted these emotions more than their low trait EI peers. Thus, the general pattern of affective overprediction of decision-related affect was qualified by trait EI.

Which individual differences variables should be targeted by behavioural decision researchers? Trait EI is an obvious candidate, since it provides comprehensive coverage of emotion-related self-perceptions that are directly relevant to the study of affective decision-making. Other researchers have found that individual differences in the way people weigh the future consequences of their decisions are relevant to the experience of post-decisional emotions (Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger, & Edwards, 1994). Such findings illustrate the necessity of exploring ways to integrate experimental and individual differences approaches to the study of the interrelationships between decision-making, emotions, and personality.

Our findings are also relevant to trait EI theory (Petrides et al., *in press a*) and support the view that high trait EI is not always adaptive; rather, its adaptive value will vary depending on the context. This is a basic tenet of trait EI theory, which differentiates it from approaches that view the construct as a cognitive ability, competency, or skill. While a lot of work remains to be done in order to elucidate the conditions and contexts under which high scores on EI questionnaires have maladaptive implications, we believe there is sufficient evidence to accept that such conditions and contexts exist, a fact that only trait EI theory can successfully accommodate.

There are now several studies suggesting that individual differences in trait EI influence how people respond to affect-laden emotional stimuli. However, the variability in experimental paradigms prevents us from drawing firm conclusions regarding underlying processes. This is an area where further research, with a specific emphasis on careful replication, may be fruitfully pursued.

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