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Australian Journal of Psychology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713701010>

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Online publication date: 04 March 2010

To cite this Article Sánchez-Ruiz, María José, Pérez-González, Juan Carlos and Petrides, K. V.(2010) 'Trait emotional intelligence profiles of students from different university faculties', Australian Journal of Psychology, 62: 1, 51 – 57

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/00049530903312907

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00049530903312907>

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Trait emotional intelligence profiles of students from different university faculties

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Abstract

This study investigated the trait emotional intelligence (trait EI or trait emotional self-efficacy) profiles of 512 students from five university faculties: technical studies, natural sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities. Using the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire, it was hypothesised that (a) social sciences would score higher than technical studies in Emotionality, (b) arts would score higher than technical studies in Emotionality, (c) arts would score lower than technical studies in Self-control, and (d) there would be an interaction between gender and faculty, whereby female students would score higher than male students within the social sciences only. Several other exploratory comparisons were also performed. Results supported hypotheses (a), (b), and (d), but not hypothesis (c), although the differences were in the predicted direction.

Keywords: *Career choice, gender, Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire, trait emotional self-efficacy, vocational interests*

Trait emotional intelligence (trait EI or trait emotional self-efficacy) is defined as a constellation of emotion-related self-perceptions and dispositions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). The construct provides a comprehensive operationalisation of the affect-related aspects of personality (Table I) and lies wholly outside the taxonomy of human cognitive ability (Carroll, 1993).

Research on trait EI has gathered significant momentum in the last few years, which has helped to establish a nomological network for the construct. It is only in the presence of such a network that group comparison studies, such as the one presented in this article, can be meaningfully interpreted and linked to the core nature of a psychological construct (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). Some salient contributions to this line of research include studies showing that trait EI is related to affective decision making (Sevdalis, Petrides, & Harvey, 2007), emotion regulation (Mikolajczak, Nelis, Hansenne, & Quoidbach, 2008), peer-ratings of behaviour

(Petrides, Sangareau, Furnham, & Frederickson, 2006; Smith, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2008), performance in laboratory tasks (Austin, 2004, 2009), psychopathology (Malterer, Glass, & Newman, 2008), and relationship satisfaction (Smith, Ciarrochi, & Heaven, 2008). A growing number of studies have shown mediational and incremental trait EI effects over various relevant variables (e.g., Austin, Saklofske, & Mastoras, 2010; Downey, Johnston, Hansen, Birney, & Stough, 2010; Gardner & Qualter, 2010; Hogan et al., 2010; Johnson, Batey, & Holdsworth, 2009; Kluemper, 2008; Mavroveli, Petrides, Sangareau, & Furnham, 2009; Petrides, Pérez-González, & Furnham, 2007; Saklofske, Austin, & Minski, 2003; Schutte et al., 2010).

Strong evidence from a number of personality questionnaires (e.g., Cattell, Eber, & Tatsuoka, 1970; Costa & McCrae, 1992) supports the view that students in different academic subjects have different personality profiles. Given the mounting theoretical and empirical links between personality and trait EI (Vernon, Villani, Schermer, & Petrides,

Table I. Internal consistencies for the trait EI factors and global score ($N=512$)

	High scorers perceive themselves as ...	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α
Wellbeing		5.02 (.94)	.86
Self-esteem	... successful and self-confident.		
Trait happiness	... cheerful and satisfied with their lives.		
Trait optimism	... confident and likely to “look on the bright side” of life.		
Self-control		4.21 (.76)	.75
Emotion control	... capable of controlling their emotions.		
Stress management	... capable of withstanding pressure and regulating stress.		
Impulsiveness (low)	... reflective and less likely to give into their urges.		
Emotionality		5.01 (.72)	.76
Emotion perception (self and others)	... clear about their own and other people’s feelings.		
Emotion expression	... capable of communicating their feelings to others.		
Relationships	... capable of having fulfilling personal relationships.		
Trait empathy	... capable of taking someone else’s perspective.		
Sociability		4.72 (.72)	.76
Social awareness	... accomplished networkers with excellent social skills.		
Emotion management (others)	... capable of influencing other people’s feelings.		
Assertiveness	... forthright, frank, and willing to stand up for their rights.		
Adaptability [†]	... flexible and willing to adapt to new conditions.		
Self-motivation [†]	... driven and unlikely to give up in the face of adversity.		
Global trait EI		4.72 (.59)	.92

Notes: EI = emotional intelligence.

[†]These facets feed directly into the global trait EI score without going through any factor.

2008), the extensive literature on personality profiles can steer the development of hypotheses in trait EI research. It is, in fact, one of the main advantages of trait EI theory that it can link the construct to the mainstream personality literature. This is particularly useful when tackling novel research questions for which there is no prior empirical literature, as in the present case.

Arts students tend to score higher in neuroticism than natural sciences and social sciences students (Rubinstein, 2005) and also appear to be less sociable and extraverted than students in other faculties (Csikszentmihalyi & Getzels, 1973). Natural sciences students, on the other hand, prefer precision over ambiguity and score higher in conscientiousness and conformity (Harris, 1993; Kline & Lapham, 1992). Students in social science disciplines have higher scores than technical and natural sciences students in openness to experience, empathy, and cooperation (Babbage & Ronan, 2000; Beauchamp & McKelvie, 2006). Introversion is a trait frequently found among technical studies students (Kirkcaldy, 1988). In addition, students with social career aspirations (e.g., guidance counsellors and teachers) tend to score higher in agreeableness than students in engineering (Larson, Wei, Wu, Borgen, & Bailey, 2007).

Much research has focused on the links between personality traits and academic and vocational interests. Costa, McCrae, and Holland (1984) found that extraversion was related to social and enterprising interests, while openness to experience was related to artistic and investigative interests, with recent meta-analyses confirming these relation-

ships (Barrick, Mount, & Gupta, 2003; Larson, Rottinghaus, & Borgen, 2002). Costa et al. (1984) also reported a positive relationship between neuroticism and artistic interests (although only for male participants), and a negative relationship between extraversion and investigative interests. Further studies have ascertained that agreeableness, well-being, social closeness, and warmth are all closely linked to social interests (DeFruyt & Mervielde, 1997; Staggs, Larson, & Borgen, 2007; Sullivan & Hansen, 2004).

Hitherto, there has been little research into trait EI profile differences across faculties. Although much is known about general personality differences, more data are necessary to clarify specific emotional differences across various groups of students. The present study seeks to contribute in this direction.

In a preliminary study, Pérez and Castejón (2005) applied the Schutte Assessing Emotions Scale to a sample of university students and found that those in educational degrees scored higher in global trait EI than those in technical studies. We extended this research by looking at more disciplines and using a comprehensive instrument that captures all of the facets of trait EI.

Various studies have established interaction effects of gender and discipline on personality traits (Beauchamp & McKelvie, 2006; Roberti, Fox, & Tunick, 2003; Rubinstein, 2005). For example, female participants with social career aspirations score significantly higher than their male peers in agreeableness, in contrast to female participants with investigative or artistic interests (Larson et al., 2007).

In the light of such findings, we thought it important to also incorporate gender into the design in order to test for possible interaction effects.

Given the paucity of closely related work, there was a salient exploratory aspect to this research. Nevertheless, based on our review of the personality literature, we advanced four specific hypotheses: H1, social sciences will score higher in the Emotionality factor of trait EI than technical studies; H2, arts will score higher in the Emotionality factor of trait EI than technical studies; H3, arts will score lower in the Self-control factor of trait EI than technical studies; and H4, there will be a Gender \times Faculty interaction in the Emotionality factor of trait EI, whereby female students will score higher than male students, but in the social sciences only.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 512 students (202 male) from 17 to 44 years of age ($M = 21.37$ years, $SD = 3.79$). Students came from the following faculties: technical studies ($N = 73$; 40 in computer science and 33 in engineering); natural sciences ($N = 65$; 36 in medicine and 29 in chemistry/biology); social sciences ($N = 291$; 262 in psychology and 29 in sociology/education/social work); arts ($N = 54$; 20 in drama/music studies, 34 in ballet); and humanities ($N = 29$ in history/philosophy/linguistics).

Measure and procedure

The dataset was extracted from the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue) (Petrides, 2009) data archives. We chose to include only participants studying in the UK in order to avoid ambiguities arising from variations in course content and cultural differences. The TEIQue is a 153-item questionnaire providing comprehensive coverage of the sampling domain of trait EI. The instrument has shown excellent psychometric properties in a series of studies (Freudenthaler, Neubauer, Gabler, & Scherl, 2008; Mikolajczak, Luminet, Leroy, & Roy, 2007). Items are scored on a 7-point Likert scale and completion time is approximately 20 min. The 20 TEIQue variables (15 facets, four factors, and global trait EI) are presented in Table I, along with descriptive statistics and brief explanations. All TEIQue instruments are available, free of charge, for academic research purposes.

Results

We performed a univariate factorial ANOVA with global trait EI as the dependent variable, and faculty

(technical studies/natural sciences/social sciences/arts/humanities) and gender as the independent variables. For a more detailed analysis of the dataset and in order to examine possible factor-level differences, we also carried out a MANOVA with an optimised linear combination of the four trait EI factors as the dependent variable, and faculty and gender as the independent variables. This was followed up by univariate ANOVAs and, where appropriate, Games–Howell post hoc tests.

Faculty and gender differences in trait EI

The ANOVA indicated differences in global trait EI scores between the five faculties, $F(4,508) = 3.21$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .16$. Neither gender nor the Faculty \times Gender interaction were statistically significant (Table II). Games–Howell post hoc tests showed that arts students ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 0.53$) scored significantly higher than humanities students ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.77$, $p < .05$).

The MANOVA yielded significant main effects of both faculty, Wilk's $\lambda = .939$, $F(4,508) = 1.96$, $p < .05$, and gender, Wilk's $\lambda = .960$, $F(4,508) = 5.21$, $p < .01$, as well as a significant interaction between the two, Wilk's $\lambda = .930$, $F(4,508) = 2.28$, $p < .05$.

Subsequent ANOVAs (Table III) indicated significant differences (Table IV) in three of the four trait EI factors: Wellbeing, $F(4,508) = 2.28$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .13$, with arts scoring higher than humanities; Self-control, $F(4,508) = 2.79$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .14$, with natural sciences scoring higher than both social sciences and humanities; and Emotionality, $F(4,508) = 4.09$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .17$, with technical studies scoring lower than both social sciences and arts, and humanities scoring lower than social sciences ($p < .05$ for all pairwise comparisons, Games–Howell post hoc test). There were no significant differences in the sociability factor. With respect to gender differences, male students scored higher in the Self-control factor, $F(1,508) = 8.92$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .13$.

As hypothesised, there was a significant Faculty \times Gender interaction in Emotionality, $F(4,508) = 3.18$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .15$. Simple main effect analysis

Table II. ANOVA of global trait EI vs. faculty and gender

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Faculty	4	2.92*	.02	.15
Gender	1	.45	.50	.03
Faculty \times Gender	4	.91	.45	.08

Notes: EI = emotional intelligence.

* $p < .05$.

showed that, in the social sciences faculty, male students scored significantly lower than female students, $F(1,506) = 15.16, p < .01$, while the opposite was the case in humanities, $F(1,506) = 5.26, p < .05$.

Discussion

We investigated the profiles of students from different university faculties and found statistically significant differences in global trait EI as well as in Wellbeing, Self-control, and Emotionality. We also found a significant Gender \times Faculty interaction in Emotionality.

Differences between faculties

The first hypothesis was supported by the results, because social sciences students scored higher than their technical studies peers in Emotionality (H1). This accords well with findings showing that the former are more agreeable, cooperative, and empathic than the latter (Babbage & Ronan, 2000; Beauchamp & McKelvie, 2006; Larson et al., 2007).

Arts scored significantly higher in Emotionality than technical studies, thus supporting H2. This is in line with Kirkcaldy (1988), who found that introverted students are more inclined to enrol in technical degrees. In contrast, there was not enough evidence to support H3. Although arts did score lower than natural sciences and technical studies in Self-control, neither of these differences reached statistical significance. Thus, we have only limited evidence that arts students perceive themselves as less able to regulate their emotions and control their stress levels.

In fact, the arts group scored higher than all other groups in Wellbeing and global trait EI, although only the comparison against humanities reached significant levels. This perhaps contradicts studies reporting high levels of neuroticism in artists (Eysenck, 1972; Götz & Götz, 1979; Rubinstein, 2005). The higher global trait EI score of the arts group also contradicts the idea that arts students are relatively uninterested in social closeness (Roberti et al., 2003) and see themselves as aloof, cold, and reserved (Csikszentmihalyi & Getzels, 1973; Eysenck, 1972). It is noteworthy, however, that

Table III. ANOVA of the trait EI factors vs. faculty and gender

Source	DV	df	F	η^2	p
Faculty	Wellbeing	4	2.28*	.13	.047
	Self-control	4	2.79*	.14	.026
	Emotionality	4	4.09**	.17	.003
	Sociability	4	.98	.08	.413
Gender	Wellbeing	1	.58	.03	.446
	Self-control	1	8.92**	.13	.003
	Emotionality	1	.28	.02	.596
	Sociability	1	1.23	.05	.267
Faculty \times Gender	Wellbeing	4	.73	.08	.566
	Self-control	4	2.20	.13	.067
	Emotionality	4	3.18*	.15	.013
	Sociability	4	.43	.06	.783

Notes: DV = dependent variable; EI = emotional intelligence.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table IV. TEIQue descriptives vs. faculty and gender

	Wellbeing			Self-control			Emotionality			Sociability			Global		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Technical sciences (53M/20F)															
M	4.99	4.82	4.95	4.52	3.85	4.34	4.77	4.63	4.73	4.74	4.44	4.66	4.74	4.46	4.66
SD	0.82	0.94	0.85	0.65	0.74	0.74	0.60	0.59	0.59	0.68	0.55	0.66	0.52	0.53	0.53
Natural sciences (38M/27F)															
M	5.05	5.04	5.04	4.39	4.48	4.43	5.06	4.71	4.92	4.70	4.72	4.71	4.80	4.70	4.76
SD	1.22	1.09	1.16	0.79	0.66	0.74	0.76	0.78	0.78	0.85	0.71	0.79	0.69	0.60	0.65
Social sciences (72M/219F)															
M	5.10	5.05	5.06	4.36	4.07	4.14	4.91	5.18	5.11	4.82	4.72	4.75	4.74	4.74	4.74
SD	0.78	0.85	0.83	0.71	0.77	0.77	0.62	0.68	0.67	0.63	0.72	0.70	0.51	0.54	0.53
Arts (20M/34F)															
M	5.00	5.27	5.17	4.34	4.23	4.27	5.07	5.13	5.11	4.81	4.68	4.72	4.78	4.81	4.80
SD	0.72	1.00	0.91	0.68	0.59	0.62	0.63	0.74	0.70	0.67	0.69	0.68	0.46	0.58	0.54
Humanities (8M/21F)															
M	4.34	4.76	4.45	4.07	3.65	3.95	5.54	4.94	4.65	4.58	4.59	4.58	4.36	4.45	4.38
SD	1.28	1.45	1.32	0.86	0.72	0.83	1.01	0.50	0.91	0.85	0.92	0.86	0.81	0.71	0.77
Total															
M	4.97	5.05	5.02	4.38	4.10	4.21	4.88	5.09	5.01	4.75	4.69	4.72	4.71	4.72	4.72
SD	0.96	0.92	0.93	0.73	0.75	0.76	0.70	0.71	0.71	0.71	0.71	0.71	0.59	0.56	0.57

Note: TEIQue = Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire.

higher levels of introversion have often been noted in the non-performing arts population (e.g., visual artists) (Cox, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi & Getzels, 1973), while the present study focused on performing arts specialties, such as ballet, music, and drama. Further research is necessary to elucidate this issue looking at both professional and amateur samples of both performing and non-performing artists.

Results supported our hypothesis of an interaction between gender and faculty in Emotionality (H4). In the social sciences, female students scored higher than male students, while in the humanities the opposite was the case. Previous studies have reported that female participants tend to be more agreeable (Larson et al., 2007), but also more empathic and perceptive than male participants (Brody & Hall, 1993). Because these attributes are especially required in the social sciences (Mount, Barrick, & Stewar, 1998; Van der Zee, Zaal, & Piekstra, 2003), gender differences may be more evident in them. Traits such as emotion expression and empathy may not be equally important in specialties such as history, philosophy, or linguistics because they are in the social sciences (e.g., social work and psychology), where a people-oriented approach is dominant and one-to-one interactions are often required.

There were no gender differences in global trait EI or in any factor other than Self-control, where male students scored higher. This is in line with results reported by Petrides (2009), who provided a detailed discussion of gender differences in trait EI. In the present study the effect of faculty on trait EI was greater than that of gender, which accords well with the view that "gender differences in personality traits are small relative to individual variation within genders" (Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001, p. 322).

The present analysis was limited by the relatively small group sizes once students were split by gender, and even more once split by faculty. Male and female students were not equally distributed across academic fields (Table IV), reflecting the fact that female participants disproportionately choose social subjects and male students, technical subjects (there were only eight male students in the humanities subsample) (Bonnot & Croizet, 2007; Rees, Luzzo, & Doyle, 2007; Trusty, Ng, & Ray, 2000). Future research will have to recruit samples of sufficient size to allow more detailed study of gender differences in trait EI across faculties. Additional faculties (e.g., business and management) should also be considered for a more complete picture.

Conclusions and implications for future research

This study has contributed data about emotion-related personality differences across several higher education faculties. Such knowledge has the poten-

tial to inform career counselling and ongoing student assessment (e.g., Vandervoort, 2006). Career counselling practitioners may want to take into account the role of trait emotional self-efficacy in advising individuals about their career choices and dealing with problems of academic engagement and satisfaction (Brown, George-Curran, & Smith, 2003; Menhart, 1999). Personality inventories have been used extensively in this area, but the emotion-related aspects of personality had hitherto been assessed only partially and indirectly.

Establishing trait EI profiles across faculties can help achieve congruence between students' personalities and their chosen academic field. Congruence, in turn, facilitates academic achievement and successful professional development (Henry, 1989). The present findings also have implications for teachers wishing to understand the personality of their students with a view to forging mutually beneficial academic interactions. Finally, this line of research offers clues about boosting student motivation and developing appropriate reinforcements and effective modes of training. For example, technical studies students tend to be less empathic and emotionally expressive than their social sciences peers, therefore, collaborative tasks and group work may elicit increased resistance from the former, while being more useful for the latter.

Trait EI assessment may also contribute to the development of self-reflection and enhanced awareness of one's personality. Within vocational and counselling psychology (person-environment fit: Furnham, 2001; Holland, 1997; Pervin, 1968), academic and vocational choices are understood as expressions of personality dispositions. Knowledge of their trait EI profile can help students make life decisions that are consistent with their affective dispositions. Such decisions can be taken in the context of academic study, as we have examined in this paper, extracurricular activities (Petrides, Niven, & Mouskounti, 2006), or personal relationships (Smith, Heaven, et al., 2008) and may ultimately have a positive impact on one's life satisfaction.

Acknowledgement

This research was partially supported by an Erasmus Mundus PhD studentship to the first author awarded through the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.

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