

Emotional intelligence: summary of two empirical studies

La inteligencia emocional: síntesis de dos estudios empíricos

Inteligência emocional: síntese de dois estudos empíricos

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ABSTRACT: Emotional intelligence studies the ability to perceive, understand and reflect on emotions. Its conceptual framework provides a multidimensional and complex concept that allows us to thoroughly explore variations of this set of skills throughout life. This article reviews the major theories on aging and presents the results of two empirical studies comparing different age groups regarding intra and interpersonal skills of emotional intelligence. The results indicated that older adults had more developed resources than young adults, had more resources and capabilities to understand and express their emotions and to recognize those of others. In addition, they perceived a greater self-efficacy to repair their moods and to regulate their emotions in contexts of interpersonal conflict. These findings agree with the background. We introduce some proposals for future research and for future research and for designing interventional devices from a positive perspective on aging issues.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence; Old age; Gender.

RESUMEN: *La inteligencia emocional estudia la capacidad para percibir, comprender y reflexionar sobre las emociones. Su marco conceptual aporta una concepción multidimensional y compleja que permite explorar de manera integral las variaciones de este conjunto de habilidades a lo largo de la vida. En este artículo revisar las principales teorías del envejecimiento emocional y presenta los resultados de dos estudios empíricos que comparan diferentes grupos de edad respecto de las habilidades de inteligencia emocional intra e interpersonal. Los resultados indican que los adultos mayores contaban con recursos emocionales más desarrollados que los individuos más jóvenes, disponiendo de más recursos y capacidades para comprender y expresar sus emociones, así como para reconocer las de los otros. Además, perciben mayor autoeficacia para la reparación de sus estados de ánimo así como para regular sus emociones en contextos de conflicto interpersonal. Estos hallazgos condicen los antecedentes. Se presentan algunas propuestas para futuras líneas de investigación y para el diseño de dispositivos de intervención desde una perspectiva positiva de la vejez en estas temáticas.*

Palabras clave: *Inteligencia emocional; Vejez; Género.*

RESUMO: *A inteligência emocional estuda a capacidade de perceber, entender e refletir sobre as emoções. Sua estrutura conceitual fornece um conceito multidimensional e complexo que nos permite explorar de forma completa as variações de um conjunto de competências ao longo da vida. Este artigo revisa as principais teorias sobre o envelhecimento e apresenta os resultados de dois estudos empíricos, comparando diferentes faixas etárias em relações intra e interpessoais de inteligência emocional. Os resultados indicaram que adultos mais velhos têm recursos mais desenvolvidos do que os adultos jovens, dispõem de mais recursos e capacidades para compreender e expressar suas emoções e para reconhecer as dos outros. Além disso, os idosos demonstraram uma maior auto-eficácia para reparar os seus humores e regular as emoções em contextos de conflito interpessoal. Estes achados estão de acordo com o background. Introduzimos algumas propostas para futuras pesquisas e para a concepção de dispositivos de intervenção de uma perspectiva positiva em matéria de envelhecimento.*

Palavras-chave: *Inteligência Emocional; Velhice; Gênero.*

Introduction

Within the paradigm of Positive Psychology (Seligman, 1998), emotions as resources for social life emerge as an object of study; within them Emotional Intelligence is framed. Emotional Intelligence can be defined as the competence to recognize the meaning of emotions, relationships and triggering factors. At the same time, it includes the ability to perceive, understand and reflect on them and modify them to achieve an optimal emotional state (Mayer, & Ciarrochi, 2006). Emotions are of vital importance to well-being (Ciarrochi, & Scott, 2006), health (Garrido Rojas, 2006) and the resolution of conflicts in everyday life, in which the emotional response can help or hinder adaptation to the environment (Rivers, Brackett, Katulak, & Salovey, 2007). To achieve an efficient adjustment, the first requirement is to possess adequate skills of perception and understanding of one's own emotions and of those of others, and then to regulate them, in case one does not want to express them spontaneously (Gross, & Feldman Barret, 2011) .

Several studies have found that empathy, understanding and emotion regulation in interpersonal relationships increase and get more complex as people age (Blanchard Fields, 2007; Carstensen, Turan, Scheibe, Ram, Ersner-Hershfield, Samanez-Larkin, Brooks, & Nesselrode, 2011; Extremera, Fernández-Berrocal, & Salovey, 2006; Giuliani, 2011; Kafetsios, 2004). The conceptual framework of emotional intelligence provides a multidimensional and complex concept on emotional skills and allows us to explore the variations of this set of skills throughout life. This theoretical proposal is nourished, in turn, from other frameworks that address the study of emotional processes throughout life. Here, we present a summary of the most important ones.

Theories about emotional aging

The theory of Laura Carstensen, a researcher at Stanford University, holds that older adults have higher levels of emotional well-being and better regulation skills than young adults due to a regulatory change in the motivational goals. She states that in youth, individuals do not perceive a time limit in their life, so they focus on achieving goals and objectives that will enable them to obtain long-term benefits.

Unlike young adults, the elderly perceive the end of their lifetime, so their motivational goals focus on the here and now, to raise their levels of comfort and pleasure in the present. These positive experiences are obtained through close bonds and the deliberate targeting of positive emotions. The latter approach has been named "positive effect" (Carstensen, Mikels, & Mather, 2006). It consists of a pattern of selection of environmental information; young people prefer the emotionally negative material because it favors adaptation to the environment, while along adulthood bias becomes a disproportionate preference for positive information, which is consolidated in old age (Carstensen, & Charles Fung, 2003). This new direction in the selection of information serves the purpose of deepening the personal meanings associated with emotions and well-being, and implies becoming involved in activities that produce personal satisfaction. These changes have a positive effect on the ability to distinguish emotions and in a more rich and complex understanding, considering different perspectives simultaneously, including the enrichment of emotional skills in old age (Charles, & Carstensen, 2007).

Specifically with regard to emotional regulation, older adults use the strategies of situation selection more than young people do; i.e. they regulate their emotions preventively, carefully choosing activities and affective bonds in which to get involved in order to avoid negative emotions.

Blanchard Fields states the ER in older adults is qualitatively different from other life stages; the elderly have responses that are more flexible, complex – heterogeneous -, mature and effective than young adults (Coats, & Blanchard Fields, 2008).

Likewise, when in conflict with closer affective bonds, they prefer the use of emotional regulation strategies focused on themselves, i.e., they look for reflection and reevaluation of situations, rather than expressing their feeling or facing it directly (Blanchard Fields, Stein, & Watson, 2004).

Another study that researched the role of goals and the emotional complexity of interpersonal conflict situations, the elderly presented different styles of emotional regulation according to the level of complexity of interpersonal conflicts, which supports the hypothesis of their having greater flexibility and adjustment to conflict, which leads to a more effective resolution. (Blanchard Coats, & Fields, 2008).

In short, the two theories are complementary. One might even think of the synergistic operation: a) personal relationships, which become the most important source of psychological well-being, so a greater effort and more resources are devoted to achieving this (Charles, & Carstensen, 2007); b) accumulated life experience helps to perceive the complexity of everyday interpersonal conflicts, so the effectiveness of their resolution is increased and emotions are regulated (Blanchard Fields, 2007).

The role of gender

Considering the gender variable, research shows that women tend to have greater emotional skills development. According to Mauss, Bunge, and Gross (2007), these differences are due to an early learning of cultural rules which sets the conventional and appropriate way to display emotions in interpersonal behavior, similar to the rules of expression that Ekman mentioned (Ekman, & should Davidson, 1994). This learning occurs implicitly, through differential reinforcement of accepted and rejected social behavior and modeling. Thus, gender differences are not explained at a conscious and deliberate emotional regulation level, but the automatic aspects of these processes must be considered. In line with these developments from social cognition, social expectations levels must be taken into account.

Gender stereotypes regarding the emotionality of men and women are considered the strongest; it has even been called a "master" stereotype because of its high degree of pregnancy.

It is common knowledge for men and women of different ages and socio-cultural background, that is, that women are more "emotional" than men (Hess, Senécal, Kirouac, Herrera, Philippot, & Kleck, 2000). This stereotype includes belief in the greater expressiveness, intensity of emotional experience of most female specific emotions, except anger and pride, which are predominantly associated with the masculine.

Empirical studies

To explore the characteristics of women and men in Mar del Plata, Argentina, two empirical studies with different perspectives were conducted to promote a comprehensive approach. These studies analyzed the skills of emotional intelligence, empathy and emotional regulation in order to compare how women and men of different age groups manage in their daily lives.

Intrapersonal emotional intelligence

Within the paradigm of positive psychology, Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey (1999) propose the study of perceived emotional intelligence (PEI). This ability includes three domains: 1) Emotional Attention, 2) Emotional Clarity and 3) Emotional Repair. Emotional Attention is the perceived ability to detect emotions and moods. It implies the recording of facial, linguistic and paralinguistic expressions, body language, and the ability to detect the fake emotional expressions. Emotional Clarity refers to the perceived ability to discriminate clearly among feelings, analyzing the complex emotional responses through multiple lines of expression - identifying and categorizing their components - in order to understand the dynamics and relationships between different emotions. This ability helps in the anticipation of emotional reactions, and possible consequences and retrospective understanding; it also includes the ability to narrate through language (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 1999). Clarity of Feelings is considered a preventive strategy of emotion regulation, while giving meaning to the experience helps perceiving the emotion as subjectively disruptive (Extremera, & Fernandez Berrocal, 2005). Finally, Emotional Repair implies perceived ability to regulate moods, decide if they are deemed relevant or not in a specific situation; that is, the ability to increase or decrease both positive and negative emotions. The management of emotions includes monitoring, motivation to regulate them and the self-efficacy perception, as well as an effective intervention on them (Mayer, Caruso & Salovey, 1999). Emotional Repair has been considered a palliative ability, which is displayed when unwanted emotional states or incompatible goals occur (Extremera, & Fernandez Berrocal, 2005).

In a first study¹ performed in Mar del Plata, the characteristics of PEI young people, adults and the elderly were explored. 252 subjects were summoned, 146 (57.9%) of whom were female and 106 (42.1%) male. Regarding age, young adults aged between 15 and 24, adults were aged from 30 to 45 years old and old people, between 60 and 75 years old.

In order to study PEI, the Emotional State Trait Meta Mood Scale or TMMS (Fernandez Berrocal, Extremera, & Ramos, 2004) was used to evaluate the levels of intrapersonal perceived emotional intelligence, exploring three factors: 1) emotional attention; 2) emotional clarity; and 3) emotional repair.

The overall results found provided support to the positive outlook of aging while the older group showed better scores on emotional intelligence skills than younger people, which could be interpreted as the achievement of further development in this area. However, no differences were found by gender. As for the ability to understand emotions, it was higher in the elderly than in the other groups, and their ability for regulation was superior to the younger group and similar to that reported by the group of 30-45 years old. As for emotional repair, adults and seniors outperformed the group of 15-24 years old (young adults) in the ability to deliberately change emotional states. This implies that the two older age groups have more confidence in their ability to change their emotional states through reflexive strategies, in positive as well as in negative emotions. Likewise, the senior group surpassed the youth groups in regards to Emotional Clarity, i.e., that older adults throughout the sample rely more on the effectiveness of their interpretations of their emotional life dynamics and they have better language resources for affective communication. Following Thayer, Rossy, Ruiz-Padial, and Johnsen (2003) and the Extremera, and Fernandez Berrocal (2005) proposal, these results can be interpreted in terms of profiles. The young adult group presented a less healthy PEI profile, both have similar levels of emotional attention than older people, but less clarity and repair, implying that they have fewer resources to cope with and process emotional experiences.

¹ This research was published by Arias, C. & Giuliani, M. F. (2014) Explorando a inteligência emocional percebida em três faixas etárias. Um estudo realizado na Argentina. *Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre o Envelhecimento*, 19(1), 123-140.

On the other hand, the group aged 30 to 45 (adults), showed better skills than the latter in understanding and regulating emotions, this indicates a more favorable configuration of functional emotional intelligence regarding the younger age group. Finally, the group of 60-75 years old have better emotional understanding skills than the other groups, performing a richer emotional processing, with greater capacity for understanding and emotional expression, and equally effective in terms of emotional regulation and reaction. Together, these two sets of skills enable seniors to have greater resources, and a richer and more developed PEI configuration than the other age groups.

Interpersonal emotional intelligence

After analyzing the PEI characteristics, we consider the need to broaden the range of tested skills, and so to further study the emotional aging characteristics of people in Mar del Plata. To achieve this goal, we made the model we worked with more complex, to obtain richer data that could capture more accurately the characteristics of participants' emotional experience. The general framework of this new study is the interpersonal emotional intelligence, i.e. the ability to perceive and express one's own and others emotions (Faria Lima Santos, Takšić, Rätty, Molander, Holmström, Jansson, Avsec, Extremera, Fernández-Berrocal, and Toyota, 2006) and the regulation of anger and sadness in social contexts.

The emotional life is a great source of information on the relationship with the environment and allows for a quick and adjusted adaptation to contexts. The literature indicates that anger and sadness are common in interpersonal situations and are related to social skills (Rivers, Brackett, Katulak, & Salovey, 2007), as inadequate regulation of anger can lead to violence and abuse, as well as an adequate expression and regulation is associated with conflict resolution and positive change in relationships (Kennedy Moore, & Watson, 1999). Proper sadness regulation is related to altruism and empathy, while the deficit of this ability has been associated with internalizing symptoms such as depression and anxiety (Zeman, Shipman, & Suveg, 2002) and lower peer acceptance (Perry-Parrish, & Zeman, 2011).

Eisenberg's research (2000) claims that perceiving and understanding the emotions of others makes it possible to empathize with them; this, in turn, can provide emotional regulation behaviors. The manner in which these processes are performed can vary depending on the person's life experience; it is interesting to explore the differences among age, the social cognitive processes such as empathy, the emotional regulation and the interpersonal emotional intelligence. From these notions, a study on people from Mar del Plata is proposed.

For the empirical research² of these processes, a non-experimental design was implemented. It involved 411 people (209 of whom were women) from Mar del Plata, grouped according to the following age criteria: 1) 13 to 18; 2) 30 to 35; 3) 47 to 52; 4) 64-69; and 5) 81-86; -these last groups were living in private households and had no cognitive impairment. They were asked to complete in a voluntary and anonymous basis the following scales:

- Perception and understanding of emotions (PU) and expression and labeling of emotions (EL), as per the *Emotional Skills and Competence Questionnaire* (Faria, *et al.*, 2009).

- Empathic concern and perspective taking, as per the *Interpersonal Reactivity Index* questionnaire (Davis, 1980, 1983, Spanish version by Mestre Escrivá, Frias Navarro Samper, & García, 2004).

- Interpersonal vignettes conflicts by Coats and Blanchard-Fields (2008). Two vignettes were presented, one of anger and another one of sadness in order to provide a standardized interpersonal conflict scenario from which to elicit anger or sadness. After reading each vignette, the subjects had to answer the *Emotional Regulation Strategies* questionnaire (Coats, & Blanchard-Fields, 2008).

² This research was previously introduced in Latin American Research Network on Ageing (LARNA) *Diversidad cultural y el envejecimiento en el marco de la comunidad y la familia*. Buenos Aires, 2 y 3 de Septiembre (Giuliani, 2014).

The results of this study show that older adults have greater capacity to perceive, express their emotions and understand the emotions of others than younger participants. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Blanchard Fields, 2007; Carstensen, *et al.*, 2011; Extremera, Fernández-Berrocal, & Salovey, 2006; Giuliani, 2011; Kafetsios, 2004; Richter & Kunzmann, 2011; Schulz, & Heckhausen, 1998). As we said, the studied older adults, reported having higher perception, more understanding and more emotional expression, as well as greater ability to share the emotional experience of others. These characteristics are predictors of higher levels of health, well-being and appropriateness of emotional response in social contexts (Ciarrochi, & Scott, 2006, Garrido Rojas, 2006; Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 1999; Rivers, Brackett, Katulak, & Salovey, 2007). Moreover, this finding can challenge the incidence cohort effects and social stereotypes, which suggest that older people are more indifferent, and give less importance to emotional experience (Sanchez Palacios, 2004).

As to the results regarding gender comparison, we found that there are differences and similarities between the two groups. Both men and women agreed on the levels of skills to perceive, understand and express their emotions - as well as those of the others -, in the ability to see things from others' point of view, and in the regulatory strategies implemented during the experience of anger. These similarities are very interesting because they provide evidence to suggest that gender socialization and social stereotypes could be losing cogency, as pointed out by Sanchez Núñez, Fernandez Berrocal, Montañés Rodriguez, and Latorre Postigo, 2008), although historically, understanding and emotional expression features were associated to female subjects (Hess, Senécal, Kirouac, Herrera, Philippot, & Kleck, 2000). At the same time, the gender differences found indicate that women, experiencing sadness in an interpersonal situation tend to search for social support and try to understand their emotions in depth more than men. In addition, women have higher levels of empathic concern, which is related to the ability to feel what the other feels. These two findings coincide with the differential aspects of female primary socialization, as women are taught to share their emotions and to feel with others (Ekman, & Davidson, 1994; Mauss, Bunge, & Gross, 2007). In short, as regards gender, the results show some flexibility in gender stereotypes - especially in the case of anger experiences. At the same time, we find consistent evidence with prediction models of gender socialization in western culture.

With regard to differences by age group in emotional regulation skills, the findings are very interesting. For the anger scenario, older people reports show they were more likely to apply acceptance strategies and less emotional expression than younger adults were. Such behavior is contrary to the behavior that anger automatically triggers (Palmero, Abascal, Martinez, & Montañés, 2002), so this information could account for higher skills in personal self-regulation (Koole, Van D Leen, & Sheppes, 2011). In addition, this type of behavior may imply lower levels of interpersonal conflict (Kennedy Moore, & Watson, 1999). Concerning the regulation of sadness in the interpersonal context, seniors also reported greater use of passive strategies, such as acceptance, but greater emotional expression and greater involvement in attempts to change the situation. These results indicate that older adults have flexible and varied resources to tackle this kind of experience, which not only facilitates the healthy adaptation to different everyday situation but also to exceptional challenges. In this case, the behavior reported by older adults is consistent with the behavior that sadness facilitates automatically. It has been found that greater acceptance and expression of sadness promote social integration and therefore they are adaptive. The identification of these two differential patterns for the regulation of anger and sadness seem to have a common direction, the care and strengthening of affective bonds, a finding that is consistent with the theory of Social Emotional Selectivity (Charles, & Carstensen, 2007) and with previous studies on population in Mar del Plata (Giuliani, Zariello, Scolni, & Goris, Walker, 2013).

Conclusions

Findings of this study provide empirical support to hold that old age - even in individuals with advanced old age - is not a synonym of decline, but levels of psychological functioning can be maintained and even improved, coinciding with Carstensen (Charles, & Carstensen, 2007) and Blanchard Fields' proposals (2007). Older adults who participated in the study had more developed emotional resources than younger individuals had; and in fact, the results indicate that they have greater resources and capacities to understand and express their emotions, and to recognize them in others. In addition, they have greater self-efficacy perception to repair their moods as well as to regulate their emotions in contexts of interpersonal conflict.

The joint operation of these resources makes up a range of skills that encourage older adults to form positive and flexible relationships. In the last three decades, intergenerational family relationships have increased and become more complex. Families live longer, and its members differ in their lifestyles, communication patterns and vital interests (Birditt, & Fingerman, 2013). In this context, the resources of the elderly surely function as powerful facilitators for their social adaptation and, accordingly, to strengthen their social networks.

Furthermore, these results can benefit the community with the development of social interventions (see Giuliani, Gasparri, and Pantusa, in this volume). This ability to transfer specific actions for prevention and health promotion in the local cultural context is crucial to enhance the role of the elderly in our society (Villar, 2012). For example, a possible intervention would be to implement intergenerational workshops where the greatest experts participate as peers in resolving interpersonal conflicts. From a Vygotskian perspective (Flecha, Padrós, & Puigdemívol, 2003), this would result in the enrichment of comprehension and emotional regulation strategies for young people and for the improvement of seniors' expertise. Moreover, this study collaborates to demystify social stereotypes that negatively affect this age group, disempowering (Iacub, & Arias, 2011) their autonomy, understanding and ability to adapt to complex and/or new situations.

Summing up, we hope this research will help to highlight the importance of continuing the study of emotional aging; it is an extremely complex scenario and it is in full development. Currently, increasingly complex approaches have been proposed that integrate individual and social levels, and enable a more valid dynamic and ecological view of interpersonal emotional functioning (Aldao, 2015). In the coming years we will be able to fully understand what factors contribute to have better relationships, which will be nourished by all age groups and in turn provide us with a richer emotional experience in all stages of life.

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