Abstract

THE CONTRIBUTION OF TRAIT EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE TO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHILDHOOD ADVERSITY AND PSYCHIATRIC SYMPTOMS IN ADULTHOOD

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Trait emotional intelligence (TEI) has been found to be an important predictor of and protective factor against psychopathology, including psychopathology in the context of trauma (Hofman et al., 2016; Rudenstine & Espinosa, 2018). The long-established empirical investigation of the relationship between trauma and psychopathology has brought attention to the significance of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Similarly, recent literature has honed in on how important aspects of a person’s development such as their attachment style and the culture within which their development is embedded, can mutually inform their development of TEI. This dissertation is an attempt to derive a greater understanding of the mechanisms through which ACEs have an impact on mental health functioning. Additionally, it aims to explore the combined effect that TEI and psycho-cultural factors such as acculturation and mental health stigma (MHS) can have on mental health functioning.

Participants in the clinic sample (N = 340) of this study are clients who were seeking services at a community-based mental health clinic in Northern Manhattan, New York City (NYC). Participants in the student sample (N = 200) are undergraduate students at an urban public university in NYC. Participants completed self-report measures of TEI, psychiatric...
symptoms, ACEs, MHS, relationship attachment, perceived social support (PSS), and acculturation.

Across samples, correlation analyses showed that psychiatric symptoms had the strongest association with TEI than was seen with any of the other variables. Additionally, acculturation was not significantly correlated with any of the other variables. In the clinic sample, ACEs were negatively correlated with PSS and positively correlated with MHS, neither of which was the case in the student sample. Similarly, psychiatric symptoms were positively correlated with MHS and attachment avoidance and anxiety in the clinic sample. In the student sample, psychiatric symptoms were positively correlated with attachment avoidance and anxiety, not MHS. Participants in the clinic sample had significantly higher levels of ACEs and psychiatric symptoms, and significantly lower levels of TEI than participants in the student sample.

In the clinic sample, ACEs were indirectly related to psychiatric symptoms; greater ACEs were associated with higher attachment anxiety and lower TEI, which in turn were associated with greater psychiatric symptoms. In the student sample, ACEs were also indirectly related to psychiatric symptoms. However, greater ACEs were only associated with lower TEI, which in turn were associated with greater psychiatric symptoms. Mental health stigma and TEI predicted psychiatric symptoms in the clinic sample. However, TEI predicted a greater portion of the variance above and beyond MHS. Only TEI predicted psychiatric symptoms in the student sample. These findings indicate that helping to bolster patients’ TEI can serve as a protecting factor against adult psychopathology in the context of childhood adversity and against psychiatric symptoms in general.

*Keywords:* trait emotional intelligence, adverse childhood experiences, mental health stigma, acculturation, and psychiatric outcomes.