

Family functioning and trait emotional intelligence among youth

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Abstract

This study explored the relationship between family functioning and trait emotional intelligence among 547 respondents, between the age of 16 and 24 years from Malaysia, Iran, China, Sudan, Somalia, Morocco, the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands. The questionnaires were Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale III and Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire Short Form. Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant relationship between family functioning and trait emotional intelligence. The higher the family functioning, the higher the trait emotional intelligence among youths. The findings provide a deeper understanding in the field of family functioning and trait emotional intelligence and have implications for parents, administrators and child relationships dealing with trait emotional intelligence.

Keywords

family adaptability, family cohesion, family functioning, trait emotional intelligence, youth

Introduction

Developmental theories describe adolescence as the period of growth when identity formation is addressed (Klimstra et al., 2010; Muuss, 1996). In other words, a lesser role is perceived for family in this period, as during adolescence, family plays a trivial role in young people's lives. The youth gain physical, emotional and cognitive independence during and after adolescence while becoming more independent and continuing to grow at the same time (Muuss, 1996). However, they still need to maintain a balance in their home environment as well as an impregnable affecting base to delve into the world and attain more experience (Cavendish et al., 2014; Hong and Park, 2012). Such experience gives the adolescents the chance to return to the family and home when they need backing, unequivocal devotion and appreciation in the challenging times of their lives. Young individuals enhance their experience utilising their knowledge of esteem, consideration, unity, concurrence, affable and changeability while interacting with home conventions and family relationships (Galvin et al., 2015). These individuals have the advantage of testing how they think, feel or behave in the family environment, as well as examining and learning from relationships within their own and other families. Hence, it is natural that they fail sometimes, and the experience will teach

them how to analyse the experience to help them handle their problems.

Furthermore, the constantly positive family relations and links are constructive factors against some health risk behaviours (Chen et al., 2017). Despite the continuously developing nature of relationships, the continuity of family connections and a secure emotional base is crucial for the positive development of young people which requires the ongoing family connections and a constructive emotional basis (Chandran and Nair, 2015).

People with higher emotional intelligence (EI) encounter less depression, are healthier and can build up better connections (Gugliandolo et al., 2015b). The EI is a type of social intelligence that enables the individuals to control feelings and emotions, distinguish them and utilise this information to mentor their thoughts and deeds (Salovey and Mayer, 1990). In other words, EI is the key element of

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'social maturity' that enhances adolescents' psychological health (Lau and Wu, 2012).

According to Petrides et al. (2007), Trait EI, or emotional self-efficacy, measures an individual's belief in their emotional abilities. It is defined as 'a constellation of emotional self-perceptions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies' (p. 287). Trait EI consists of four indicators: emotionality, sociability, self-control and well-being. Emotionality refers to emotional expression, trait empathy, emotion perception and the quality of relationships. Sociability refers to emotion management, or ability to affect other people, assertiveness and social awareness. Self-control is impulsiveness and stress management. Well-being is described as optimism, self-esteem beliefs and trait happiness. These factors provide implications for the crucial life domains, such as health (Costa et al., 2014), parenting (Gugliandolo et al., 2015a), mental well-being (Andrei and Petrides, 2013), university performance (Sanchez-Ruiz et al., 2013), academic achievement in school (Azimifar, 2013), leadership and career decision-making (Di Fabio and Saklofske, 2014) and pro-social behaviour and self-management skills in early adolescent (Bar-On and Parker, 2000).

Family communication plays a key role in building constructive family relations. Family communication is the way verbal and nonverbal information is interchanged between family members to share needs and concerns, and find solutions for problems (Peterson and Green, 2009). As illustrated in the three-dimensional model of marital and family systems, a family has quality communication skills (communication dimension), the members of the family are more likely to be close (cohesion dimension) and they can resolve problems accordingly (adaptability dimension) (Olson and DeFrain, 2000; Olson et al., 1983). In addition, a good family communication is a key element of family functioning, and an indicator of children's emotional and social progress (Manuel, 2002). Healthy family functioning is facilitated through open communication by forming positive change context, insight and development. Without proper communication, the family would have a very limited flexibility to change when it is necessary (Olson and DeFrain, 2000; Olson et al., 1983).

In this regard, family environment has an impact on children's emotional base (Alegre, 2012; Alegre and Benson, 2010; Argyriou et al., 2016; Bhatia, 2012; Chandran and Nair, 2015; Ozbaci, 2006). Impact is observed in the emotional and social competencies when family relationships become secure and smooth (Chandran and Nair, 2015). Furthermore, there is a relationship between parenting and children's trait EI (Alegre, 2012; Alegre and Benson, 2010; Gottman et al., 1997; Liao et al., 2003). The amount of time mothers spend with their children and the quality of their interactions are important factors in forming children's trait EI. The more joint activity times represent better parenting, and the promotion of

parent modelling, reinforcement, shared attention and social cooperation (Alegre, 2012). Consequently, parent-child interaction leads to less emotional and behavioural problems (Galboda Liyanage et al., 2003; Gardner et al., 2003; Gugliandolo et al., 2015b), better academic achievement (Mingyue et al., 2001) and adolescents' mental health (Cousins et al., 2007). Therefore, parental psychological control predicts trait EI, which mutually affects behaviour problems in adolescent (Gugliandolo et al., 2015a). Argyriou et al. (2016) found a link between parenting styles and trait EI in adolescent, linking authoritarianism to a lower level of trait EI that may hinder the progress of trait EI. At factor level of trait EI, self-control predicts externalising problems, while well-being predicts internalising problems across all rating sources (Gugliandolo et al., 2015b). Emotionality and sociability distinctively predict problem behaviours based on the rating source, where the direct impact of specific trait EI variables on behavioural and emotional problems is observed during adolescence.

Another important factor contributing to a firm and active base in the development and progress of youth emotional well-being and trait EI is family adaptability that consists of family flexibility and family cohesion. Family flexibility is quality and expression of leadership, role relationship and relationship rules and negotiations (Koutra et al., 2016). Family cohesion is the family connectedness and emotional bonding towards one another (Koutra et al., 2016). Dominant healthy relationship in family makes the youth feel secure and well-adjusted, conceiving that they are accepted by the family, therefore, in the future, they will continue to have the well-adjusted feeling that society accepts them (Bhatia, 2012). Another study about the relationship between adolescents and family connectedness revealed that connectedness between adolescents and their family is a key element in differentiating collective and individualistic cultures (Dwairy and Achoui, 2010).

Only few studies have addressed family adaptability and cohesion and youth trait EI. This is the stage when the issues of emotional separation from family appear (Dwairy and Achoui, 2010). The sense of separation is a necessary step in the development of personal values, the evolution to self-sufficiency forces. Therefore, this study looked into the influence of family adaptability and cohesion and trait EI among youths.

Methodology

The sample was collected randomly from the youth after obtaining the informed consent from all participants. Out of 457 youths from Malaysia, Iran, China, Sudan, Somalia, Morocco, the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands, 284 were female and 173 were male. Respondents' age was between 16 and 24 years. The summary of the respondents' demographic data is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of respondents' demographic data (N = 457).

Demographic data		Frequency
Gender	Female	284
	Male	173
Age (years)	16–18	160
	19–21	112
	22–24	185
Nationality	Malaysian	70
	Iranian	65
	Chinese	45
	Sudanese	58
	Somalian	55
	Moroccan	44
	British	35
German	38	
Dutch	47	

Table 2. Reliability analysis of scales.

Variables	Subscales	No of items	Cronbach's alpha
Family Functioning	FA	10	.847
Trait Emotional Intelligence	FC	10	.776
	Global TEI	30	.711

FA: Family Adaptability; FC: Family Cohesion; TEI: Trait Emotional Intelligence.

The respondents completed measures of family functioning and trait EI. Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale III (FACES III) by Olson et al. (1985) was used to measure family functioning. FACES III has 20 items to assess family adaptability and cohesion. It assesses the degree to which family members are adaptive and attached to their family. There are four levels of family adaptability: very flexible, flexible, structured and rigid levels. The central levels (flexible and structured) are considered the balanced levels of family adaptability. The two extreme levels (very flexible and rigid) are considered the unbalanced levels of family adaptability. On the other hand, the four levels of family cohesion consist of very connected, connected, separated and disengaged levels. Similarly, family adaptability has two central levels (connected and separated) which are the balanced levels of family cohesion, while the two extreme levels (very connected and disengaged) are the unbalanced levels of family cohesion. For FACES III, respondents were asked to indicate the frequency of the described behaviour in their families on a Likert scale from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). The reliability was acceptable for each domain when tested in sample of youths (Table 2). Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue-SF) from Petrides (2009) was adopted to measure youth trait EI. The TEIQue-SF consists

Table 3. Pearson correlation between variables.

Nationality	Variables (corresponding score)	Global TEI	
		r	Sig. (two-tailed)
Malaysian	FC (5)	.431***	.000
	FA (6)	.301*	.040
Iranian	FC (6)	.501**	.011
	FA (3)	.229*	.035
Chinese	FC (3)	.279*	.032
	FA (3)	.611*	.048
Sudanese	FC (7)	.428*	.040
	FA (2)	.388*	.050
Somalian	FC (7)	.165**	.001
	FA (3)	.192*	.023
Moroccan	FC (5)	.328*	.050
	FA (3)	.043**	.015
British	FC (3)	.042*	.045
	FA (3)	.248*	.029
German	FC (3)	.216*	.036
	FA (4)	.428*	.030
Dutch	FC (3)	.246*	.050
	FA (6)	.513***	.000

TEI: Trait Emotional Intelligence; FA: Family Adaptability; FC: Family Cohesion.

Corresponding score interpretation for FC: very connected (8–7), connected (6–5), separated (4–3) and disengaged (2–1). Corresponding score interpretation for FA: very flexible (8–7), flexible (6–5), structured (4–3) and rigid (2–1).

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

of 30 items to measure global trait EI and the four factors of well-being, self-control, emotionality and sociability, on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). The reliability for the global trait EI is illustrated in Table 2.

The SPSS was used for the data analysis. A bivariate analysis was processed using Pearson's correlation to measure the inter-correlations of family functioning and trait EI. As illustrated in Table 3, the family functioning components of family adaptability and family cohesion with trait EI were significantly correlated for all nationalities. The results indicated that higher family adaptability and cohesion in youths correlate positively with their trait EI.

Discussion

Reviewing the limited studies conducted on trait EI, this study provides empirical evidence that family functioning significantly influences youth trait EI. Family is a key factor during all stages of an individual's development. Providing an insight and strengthening family functioning patterns would be effective in enhancing an individual's emotional development (Chandran and Nair, 2015). In the entire development stages, particularly since the beginning

stage of adolescence, independence level from parents and dependence on peers and social interaction go up as adolescents grow older. Therefore, family adaptability (flexibility) and cohesion (connectedness) are effective in developing better trait EI at this age, where the youths and family healthy interactions result in trait EI (Alegre, 2012; Alegre and Benson, 2010; Argyriou et al., 2016; Bhatia, 2012; Chandran and Nair, 2015; Ozbaci, 2006). On the other hand, poor family adaptability and cohesion debilitates individual's trait EI. Family functioning could be enhanced if the members of a family understand their and other people's emotions and monitor their emotions (Ozbaci, 2006).

Implications from this study could be utilised by parents, children, policymakers and curriculum developers in forming a better understanding of having an effective relationship with children in the family. Emotional bonding and family's ability to change its power structure will be passed down to subsequent relationships, for example, to one's own children in their relationships with their kids. Therefore, parent awareness plays a key role and is advised to be considered more seriously by giving the priority to raising awareness in parents about the importance of adaptability and cohesion and children's emotional well-being in families. One way is providing counsellors for families and for regular visits. Frequent visits and enhanced parent counsellor meetings lead to a better understanding about parents' and child's trait EI. Healthy family functioning could develop this clearer and deeper insight. Because of the importance of the role parents play in development of family members' EI (Ozbaci, 2006), it could be concluded that if parents with low EI attend EI education programmes, improved results are obtainable in both family functioning and family members' trait EI. However, the future studies should more investigate this. Finally, the ecological factors of a family, such as family size or demographic variables, including age and gender differences in the relationship between family functioning and trait EI, and discussion from a cross-country (variation) lens of view are recommended to be explored in future studies.

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