

Relations Between a Self-Defeating Interpersonal Style and Trait Emotional Intelligence

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### Abstract

The WHO estimates that nearly one in three women are subjected to abuse by their partner. This paper aimed to evaluate the extent to which low emotional intelligence might contribute to a woman's participation in an abusive relationship. Three hundred and eight one adult women completed the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue), which measures a constellation of emotional perceptions, and the Self-Defeating Interpersonal Style Scale (SELF-DISS), which measures an individual's propensity to enter into and to remain in a relationship with an abusive partner. As predicted, moderate to strong negative correlations were found between the facets and factors of the TEIQue and the factors assessed by the SELF-DISS; particularly strong correlations existed between total SELF-DISS scores and the TEIQue facets of Relationships, Impulse Control, Assertiveness, Emotion Management, Self-Esteem and Happiness.

Keywords: Trait Emotional Intelligence, Abusive Relationships, Personality, Intimate Partner Violence

### Statements and Declarations

None of the authors has any financial or non-financial interests that are either directly or indirectly related to this work.

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

## **Relations Between a Self-Defeating Interpersonal Style and Trait Emotional Intelligence**

The World Health Organization (WHO) states that “Intimate partner violence is one of the most common forms of violence against women and includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and controlling behaviours by an intimate partner” (World Health Organization [WHO], 2012). According to the WHO, nearly one in three women are subjected to abuse in a relationship (World Health Organization [WHO], 2012). Intimate partner violence is widespread and different types of violence in partner abuse often co-exist: for instance, physical violence may be accompanied by emotional violence (WHO, 2012). It is therefore essential to know more about abusive relationships, especially during times like the year 2020-2021, where lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic “increased the exposure of women to abusive partners and known risk factors while limiting their access to services” (WHO, 2021). Individuals in abusive relationships often remain in those relationships due to fear, lack of support from loved ones, hopes that their partner will change for the better, or believing that they deserve the abuse (WHO, 2012) - subjecting themselves to self-defeating behaviours. Many abusers also utilize apologetic behaviour to show their partner that they can change, thereby manipulating the victim to stay in the relationship (Rakovec-Felser, 2014).

Additionally, abuse alternates between four stages. First is the tension-building stage, where communication stops; then the acting out period begins, where any type of abuse occurs; next is the honeymoon period, where the abuser utilizes apologetic behaviour; finally comes the calm period, where the abuse comes to a halt, and the victim believes that the abuser has changed (Rakovec-Felser, 2014).

Women in abusive relationships often go to counselling to help themselves recover and take various scale questionnaires, such as the Composite Abuse Scale, to evaluate overall partner violence. This study aims to investigate the relationship between self-defeating behavioural patterns in interpersonal relationships and trait emotional intelligence, extending a previous study by Atkinson and Vernon (2017).

### *SELF-DISS*

Atkinson and Vernon (2017) developed The Self-Defeating Interpersonal Style Scale (SELF-DISS), assessing the tendency to enter and stay in an abusive relationship. Atkinson and Vernon suggest that the self-defeating interpersonal style is “motivated by disordered attachment styles, a negative working model of the self, and a tendency toward accepting and/or rationalizing various forms of mistreatment” (Atkinson & Vernon, 2017). The scale was designed to be a comprehensive measure of self-defeating interpersonal style assessing three factors: Insecure Attachment, Undeserving Self-Image, and Self-Sacrificing Nature, as well as providing a global measure of overall SELF-DISS. The present study used the SELF-DISS scale to measure self-defeating interpersonal styles to further explain the motive behind these behaviours (Atkinson & Vernon, 2017). Other scales exist, but we used the SELF-DISS to add to the growing number of studies that have previously examined this scale and its correlates.

Insecure attachment, specifically attachment anxiety, involves an anxious tendency to create and sustain relationships due to a fear of abandonment and rejection; consequently, these individuals avoid new relationships and events that may lead to abandonment and rejection (Atkinson & Vernon, 2017). Undeserving Self-image is crucial to maintaining self-defeating interpersonal patterns. It is a belief system in which individuals view themselves as unworthy,

devaluing their self-worth and believing they deserve only bad outcomes (Atkinson & Vernon, 2017). Lastly, Self-sacrificing nature is a sacrificial interpersonal style. Individuals will often sacrifice their needs and wants while tolerating abuse and false accusations in relationships for the relationship, however bad, to continue (Atkinson & Vernon, 2017).

In addition to creating the SELF-DISS and demonstrating that its subscales all had excellent reliabilities, Atkinson and Vernon (2017) also established the measure's validity by showing moderate-to-high negative correlations with the Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI) – a measure of “bright-side” personality traits – as well as moderate-to-high positive correlations with the Hogan Development Survey (HDS) – a measure of “dark-side” personality traits. In a follow-up study, Atkinson, Lasky, Boyle, and Vernon (2019) showed that the SELF-DISS was a significant predictor of depression over and above the Big 5 personality traits, providing further evidence of the scale's validity.

### *Trait emotional intelligence*

Emotions are a core characteristic of personal relationships. So, it comes as no surprise that trait emotional intelligence (trait EI) contributes to the development and maintenance of such relationships (e.g., Malouff, Schutte, & Thorsteinsson, 2014; Jardine, Vannier, & Voyer, in press; Parker et al., 2021; Wollny, Jacobs, & Pabel, 2020). Trait EI is defined as a constellation of emotional perceptions assessed through questionnaires and rating scales (Petrides, Pita & Kokkinaki, 2007). The construct comprises multiple emotion-related facets that are prima facie relevant to relationship satisfaction and much of the spectrum of human behaviour, more generally (see Pérez-González, Saklofske, & Mavroveli, 2020). These facets are operationalized through the construct's dedicated measurement vehicle, viz., the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue; see Table 1). They are part of a hierarchical structure with four

intermediary factors (Well-being, Self-control, Emotionality, and Sociability) and global trait EI at its apex.

While multiple trait EI facets are *prima facie* relevant to relationship satisfaction, specifically, and too much of the spectrum of human behaviour, more generally (Pérez-González, Saklofske, & Mavroveli, 2020) hitherto, the construct has received only limited attention with respect to dysfunctional relationships and interpersonal styles. Some research with romantic couples has shown that trait EI is negatively linked to dysfunctional communication styles (e.g., “demand-withdraw”; Smith, Ciarrochi, & Heaven, 2008), which are predictive of relationship dissatisfaction and the likelihood of divorce. With respect to mechanisms, there is strong evidence that trait EI is a full mediator of the relationship between the abandonment schema (fear of being abandoned by your partner) and marital satisfaction (O’Connor, Izadikhah, Abedini, & Jackson, 2018).

Much additional and peripheral research leads us to expect overall negative associations between trait EI and dysfunctional romantic relationships. Much of this concerns investigations of the relationships between trait EI and various personality frameworks, such as the Big Five or HEXACO (e.g., Anglim et al., 2020; Perez-Gonzalez & Sanchez-Ruiz, 2014). These investigations generally show that trait EI is positively related to the major personality characteristics that tend to be lacking in dysfunctional romantic relationships, like Emotional Stability, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. It has also been found that trait EI is inversely linked to maladaptive interpersonal schema modes, like the “compliant surrender” mode that renders a person subservient to their romantic partner and ready to sacrifice their own needs for the chance to remain dependent on him or her (Jacobs, Wollny, Seidler, & Wochatz, 2021).

## *Hypotheses*

The broader rationale for our study is that people high on SELF-DISS will tend to have low trait EI. More specifically, we hypothesized that the three SELF-DISS subscales (Insecure Attachment, Undeserving Self Image, Self-Sacrificing Nature) and the total scale score would be significantly and negatively correlated with all TEIQue variables (facets, factors, and global).

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Although an abusive partner may victimize men, according to WHO (2012), women are much more likely to be the victims. As such, we decided to recruit only female participants. Three hundred eighty-one adult women (18 years or older) were recruited from the United States via Amazon mTurk. Their mean age was 40.6 years (SD = 13.1, range = 18 to 78).

### *Measures*

*Demographics Questionnaire:* Participants completed a demographics questionnaire indicating their gender, date of birth, and country of residence. The latter was included to ensure that all the participants were from the same country.

*Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue; Petrides, 2009):* The TEIQue comprises 153 items responded to a 7-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree). The structure of the instrument is described in the introduction. Cronbach's alphas on our sample ranged from an uncommonly low .36 for Emotion management to .84 for Impulse control at the facet level, with the values for the four factors and global trait EI scoring higher on average, as expected (see Table 1 for details). To improve the internal consistencies of the three facets, we removed poor-fitting items from them. Specifically, we removed three items from the facet of Emotion management, boosting its reliability from .36 to .73, four items from



Assertiveness, boosting its reliability from .56 to .75; and one item from Adaptability, boosting its reliability from .56 to .65. Reliabilities of all other facets and factors appear in Table 1.

*Self-Defeating Interpersonal Style Scale (SELF-DISS)*. Participants completed the 35-item version of the SELF-DISS (Atkinson & Vernon, 2018), responding to each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). This questionnaire yields scores on three factors (Insecure attachment, Undeserving self-image, and Self-sacrificing nature) and total SELF-DISS. In our sample, these factors had alphas ranging from .78 to .89 (see Table 1).

### *Procedure*

Participants were recruited via Amazon mTurk. They read a short paragraph describing the study (“a study looking at relationships between two measures of adult personality”), the approximate amount of time it would take (“less than 30 minutes”), and the compensation they would receive (\$1.00). If they chose to learn more about the study, they were directed to a lengthier (two-page) letter of information and consent form, and if they then chose to participate, they were redirected to a Qualtrics website, where they completed the demographics questionnaire, the TEIQue, and the SELF-DISS in that order. After completing and submitting the questionnaires, they were directed to a debriefing form and were emailed a unique four-digit confirmation code that allowed them to receive their compensation.

## **Results and Discussion**

Table 1 shows the correlations between the SELF-DISS scores and TEIQue variables. As can be seen, all the correlations are negative and moderate-to-high in magnitude, ranging from -.26 (between Self-sacrificing nature and Empathy) to -.80 (between global SELF-DISS and relationships). Notably, the SELF-DISS global scores correlate most strongly with the TEIQue

facets of Self-esteem (-.66), Happiness (-.66), Impulse Control (-.79), and Optimism (-.62), Relationships (-.80), and Self-motivation (-.63) as well as with the factors of Self-control (-.72) and Well-being (-.71). The two constructs were also strongly correlated at the global level (-.74).

As hypothesized, the study overall revealed large, significant, negative correlations between a measure of people's propensity to enter into and remain in a relationship with an abusive partner and their trait of emotional intelligence. This is theoretically meaningful, given that trait EI has been implicated in interpersonal relationships (e.g., Malouff, Schutte, & Thorsteinsson, 2014; Parker et al., 2021) through multiple pathways like, for example, communication patterns (Smith, Ciarrochi, & Heaven, 2008). It has also been shown to relate negatively to the "dark" socio-emotional trait of Machiavellianism (Petrides, Vernon, Aitken Schermer, & Veselka, 2011) that undermines trust and investment in partner relationships as well as leads to emotional abuse in relationships (Brewer & Abell, 2017; Ináncsi, Pilinszki, Paál, & Láng, 2018).

A serious limitation of this study includes the omission of the participants' relationship status. We cannot be certain that the responses to the SELF-DISS did not vary in regard to the participant's current relationship status. Furthermore, we can only speculate on whether individuals with low trait EI are more likely to enter into abusive relationships or whether those who, for other reasons, tolerate being in an abusive relationship are more likely to develop low trait EI in the process. In a previous study (Vernon, Petrides, Bratko, & Schermer, 2008), we reported that the trait emotional intelligence variables are at least as heritable as other personality traits, indicating individual differences in trait EI are attributable in part to innate, genetic factors. As such, it seems improbable that people with moderate or high trait EI would demonstrate a radical decline in their trait EI level as a result of being exposed to relationship

abuse, which would be less likely for them anyway (e.g., Jaffe, Simonet, Tett, Swopes, & Davis, 2015). Rather, we believe it more probable that individuals who are already low in trait EI, in part due to their genetic predispositions and/or early childhood experiences (McMahon et al., 2015), may be drawn to relationships that reflect and accommodate their low levels of trait EI, especially the Well-being factor and its facets of Self-esteem, Happiness, and Optimism.

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**Table 1**

*Correlations Between the SELF-DISS and TEIQue Variables*

Variables	Self-Diss	Insecure-Attachment	Undeserving Self-Image	Self-Sacrificing Nature	Alpha Reliability
Self-Esteem	-.66	-.62	-.65	-.56	.74
Emotion-Expression	-.55	-.52	-.49	-.51	.80
Self-Motivation	-.63	-.61	-.62	-.48	.69
Emotion Regulation	-.45	-.44	-.41	-.37	.72
Happiness	-.66	-.62	-.62	-.61	.83
Empathy	-.40	-.38	-.41	-.26	.67
Social Awareness	-.37	-.37	-.33	-.35	.69
Impulse Control	-.79	-.74	-.79	-.64	.84
Emotion Perception	-.62	-.57	-.63	-.54	.73

Stress Management	-.51	-.52	-.46	-.45	.71
Emotion Management	-.69	-.34	-.38	-.29	.73
Optimism	-.62	-.60	-.59	-.55	.78
Relationships	-.80	-.76	-.79	-.67	.81
Assertiveness	-.73	-.37	-.32	-.34	.75
Adaptability	-.47	-.46	-.46	-.39	.65
Well-Being	-.71	-.67	-.67	-.63	.90
Self-Control	-.72	-.69	-.69	-.60	.78
Emotionality	-.70	-.66	-.69	-.59	.88
Sociability	-.42	-.42	-.40	-.38	.82
Global Trait EI	-.74	-.71	-.72	-.63	.95
Reliability	.96	.94	.89	.88	—

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*Note.* All correlations are significant at the .0005 level or beyond (1-tailed), thus maintaining the study-wise Type I error rate at < .05.